(12) INTERNATIONAL APPLICATION PUBLISHED UNDER THE PATENT COOPERATION TREATY (PCT)

(19) World Intellectual Property Organization
International Bureau

(43) International Publication Date
30 October 2003 (30.10.2003)

PCT

(10) International Publication Number
WO 03/090306 A1

(51) International Patent Classification⁷: H01M 02/38, 02/12

(21) International Application Number: PCT/US03/11726

(22) International Filing Date: 16 April 2003 (16.04.2003)

(25) Filing Language: English

(26) Publication Language: English

(30) Priority Data:
60/372,977 16 April 2002 (16.04.2002) US
60/394,695 9 July 2002 (09.07.2002) US

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(81) Designated States (*national*): AE, AG, AL, AM, AT, AU, AZ, BA, BB, BG, BR, BY, BZ, CA, CH, CN, CO, CR, CU, CZ, DE, DK, DM, DZ, EC, EE, ES, FI, GB, GD, GE, GH, GM, HR, HU, ID, IL, IN, IS, JP, KE, KG, KP, KR, KZ, LC, LK, LR, LS, LT, LU, LV, MA, MD, MG, MK, MN, MW, MX, MZ, NI, NO, NZ, OM, PH, PL, PT, RO, RU, SC, SD, SE, SG, SK, SL, TJ, TM, TN, TR, TT, TZ, UA, UG, US, UZ, VC, VN, YU, ZA, ZM, ZW.

(84) Designated States (*regional*): ARIPO patent (GH, GM, KE, LS, MW, MZ, SD, SL, SZ, TZ, UG, ZM, ZW), Eurasian patent (AM, AZ, BY, KG, KZ, MD, RU, TJ, TM), European patent (AT, BE, BG, CH, CY, CZ, DE, DK, EE, ES, FI, FR, GB, GR, HU, IE, IT, LU, MC, NL, PT, RO, SE, SI, SK, TR), OAPI patent (BF, BJ, CF, CG, CI, CM, GA, GN, GQ, GW, ML, MR, NE, SN, TD, TG).

Declaration under Rule 4.17:
— *of inventorship (Rule 4.17(iv)) for US only*

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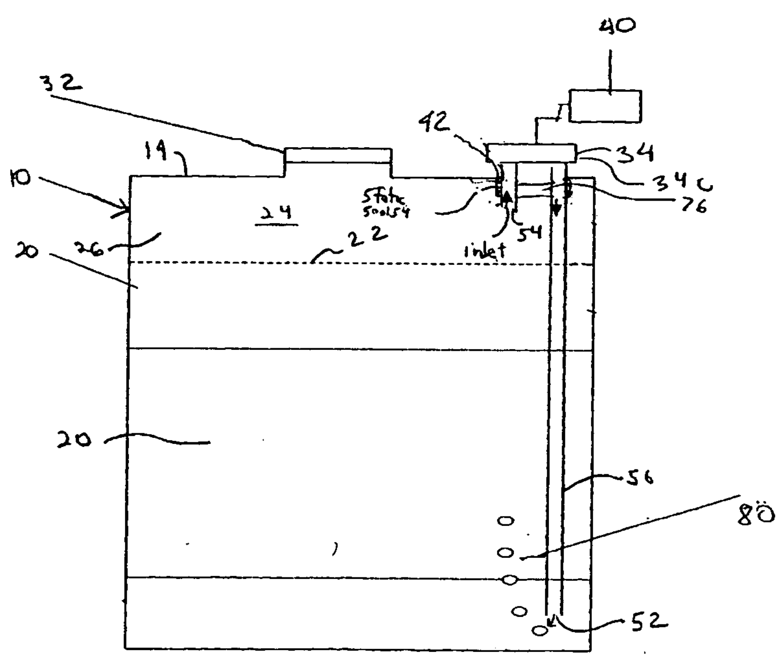
(54) Title: IMPROVED ELECTROLYTE MIXING IN WET CELL BATTERIES



(57) Abstract: A method of mixing electrolyte in a wet cell battery (10) using a pump (34) to move electrolyte (20) from a first level of said battery to a second level of said battery where the specific weight of the electrolyte is different from that of the first level. A device for mixing the electrolyte using a pump (34) and a battery cell (10) having such a device is also provided. The method of the present invention also provides an embodiment for pumping gas into the cell to mix the electrolyte.

WO 03/090306 A1

Published:
— *with international search report*
— *before the expiration of the time limit for amending the claims and to be republished in the event of receipt of amendments*

For two-letter codes and other abbreviations, refer to the "Guidance Notes on Codes and Abbreviations" appearing at the beginning of each regular issue of the PCT Gazette.

IMPROVED ELECTROLYTE MIXING IN WET CELL BATTERIES

Cross Reference to Related Application

This application claims the benefit of U.S. Provisional Application Numbers 60/372,977 filed April 16, 2002 and 60/394,695 filed July 9, 2002, the disclosures of which are hereby incorporated by reference herein.

Background

1. Field of the Invention

The present invention relates generally to wet cell batteries, such as flooded lead acid batteries, and more particularly to the mixing of electrolyte within the batteries to minimize electrolyte stratification.

2. Background of the Invention

Flooded lead-acid batteries in deep-cycle service risk acid stratification when strong acid emerging from the plates during charge sinks to the bottom of the cells. Electrolyte stratification is believed to be due to the changes of the specific weight of the sulfuric acid during charge and discharge of the battery. For example, during charge, concentrated sulfuric acid is released from the active material in the plates, increasing the local concentration of the acid (stronger concentration). Having a higher specific weight, the strong acid moves by convection and collects near the lower part of the battery cell. The stronger acid can cause damage to the negative plates and must be eliminated by mixing with the weak acid at the top of the cells. Moreover, acid readings taken of the battery after charging may be incorrect due to this phenomena.

One remedy for stratification used for many years is overcharging. The battery cells are simply overcharged with about 20% more ampere-hours than consumed during the preceding discharge, yielding a so-called "charge factor" of 1.20. This causes bubbles to form that mix the electrolyte as they float up to the surface. The amount of overcharge necessary, however, causes higher energy costs, more positive grid corrosion and more water loss, all of which leads to higher

In recent years, with the development of low-maintenance batteries, less water loss in the battery is required. Thus, improved methods of acid mixing have been accomplished which use lower charge factors. Two methods that have become commercially important are pulse charging and air-mixing.

Pulse charging is a method whereby the battery charger gives the battery short pulses of relatively high current to cause intermittent gassing in the cells. This method can reduce charge factors to about 1.06.

The major advantage of pulse charging is its simplicity; it requires no additional hardware on the battery or the charger as the mixing is controlled simply by modifying the electronic controls in the charger. Another advantage is that there cannot be an unequal distribution of the mixing effect since all the cells will always get the same amount of gassing.

A disadvantage of pulse charging is that the battery needs a special charger so that if a new battery is purchased, an expensive new charger must also be purchased. Also, since pulse charging can only be applied toward the end of the charging period, it is not compatible with "opportunity charging" where a battery is partially re-charged several times during a shift so as to increase its effective capacity.

Air-mixing is a method whereby air is bubbled into the cell to mix the acid; this method can reduce the charge factor to 1.04 or less. An air pump is usually installed inside the charger and connected by a long tube to a manifold on the battery from which air is fed by small-bore tubes to the bottom of each cell.

A major advantage of an air-mix system is that it has the potential for very low charge factors because it does not involve electrolysis. In areas with dry ambient

air, however, the dry air used for mixing can cause some evaporation of the water. Another advantage is that it can be used at any time and is, therefore, compatible with opportunity charging.

A disadvantage with an air-mix system, however, is that it can have poor distribution of air flow between cells. Another disadvantage is that the air pump is in the charger. This air pump is connected to the battery via a long tube with a quick-disconnect coupling so that the battery may be disconnected from the charger before being driven away. The problem is that the operator must now disconnect two couplings; one for the electrical charging and one for the air-mix. Sometimes the operator may forget and damage the tubing and the couplings. One solution to this problem is a dual coupling whereby the electrical and air-mix couplings are made simultaneously in one coupling. This has helped, but if acid gets into the air-mix tubing to the coupling, it can drip on to the electrical connections and corrode them. In practice, the battery will often fail to get a proper charge which is a serious fault if there is no substitute battery.

Presently known acid mixing means also have the disadvantage in that they are not suitable for "semi-flooded" cells. A "semi-flooded" cell (see U.S. Patent No. 6,274,263 to W. Jones) is a "sealed", valve regulated lead-acid cell (VRLA) in which the electrolyte is free liquid and not absorbed in a gel or absorbed glass mat (AGM) material as traditional VRLA batteries. Since it is designed to be a maintenance-free product, it cannot use pulse charging because of the higher charge factor, and cannot use air mixing because oxygen in air will discharge the negative plates. Thus an improved form of electrolyte mixing is needed which can also be used for "semi-flooded" batteries.

As presently known means for acid mixing have disadvantages, an improved means is desirable. Such a system that would be of commercial benefit and is the intent of the present invention.

Summary of the Invention:

The present invention provides an improved means of mixing acid in a battery cell that avoids many of the disadvantages of prior known mixing devices. Broadly, the method of the present invention provides for the mixing of electrolyte in a battery cell using a pump to draw fluid from one level of the battery and discharging it to another level. In one embodiment the fluid pumped is the electrolyte which is pumped from a level in the battery where the acid has one concentration to a level where the acid has a different concentration, thereby mixing the acids of the two different concentrations. By this means the acids of different specific weights mix to minimize stratification of the electrolyte. In another embodiment, the fluid pumped is gas which, when pumped into the electrolyte, mixes the acid.

The present invention also provides a battery cell having means to mix the acid. The battery cell includes a battery cell housing having upper and lower sections; positive and negative plates positioned within the housing; liquid electrolyte within the housing and in contact with the positive and negative plates; and a pump capable of pumping the electrolyte and having first and second ports through which the electrolyte flows into and out of the pump, the first port being positioned in the lower section of the housing within the electrolyte and the second port being positioned at a level higher than the first port. In another embodiment, the pump moves gas from a gas space above the electrolyte into the electrolyte to mix the acid.

The present invention further provides a device for mixing the acid in a battery cell.

Brief Descriptions of the Drawings:

The foregoing summary, as well as the following detailed description will be better understood when read in conjunction with the figures attached hereto. For the purpose of illustrating the invention, there is shown in the drawings several embodiments. It is understood, however, that this invention is not limited to the

precise arrangement and instrumentalities shown.

Figure 1 shows one embodiment of the invention using an impeller pump;

Figure 1A show a more detailed view of the pump in Figure 1;

Figure 2 shows another embodiment of the present invention using a positive displacement pump to move the electrolyte;

Figure 2A show a more detailed view of the pump in Figure 2;

Figure 3 shows a third embodiment of the present invention using a piezo pump to move the electrolyte; and

Figure 4 shows a fourth embodiment of the present invention using a displacement pump to move gas within the battery cell.

Detailed Description of the Invention:

The present invention provides a novel method and device for mixing electrolyte in wet cell batteries, e.g., flooded batteries. (The term "electrolyte" and "acid" are used interchangeably herein). The invention also provides a novel battery cell having such capabilities. One application for the present invention is deep-cycle lead-acid batteries as used in fork-lift trucks although it can be applied to any cycling application such as solar batteries, electric vehicles and so on. It is one aim of the present invention to mix the acid in all types of flooded cells including conventional "flooded" cells and also the new, sealed "semi-flooded" cells. Described below are several powered devices to mix acid effectively with little or no water wastage.

In the present invention, a separate individual pump is attached to each cell so that each cell receives ideal mixing with no distribution problems. For example, a small electric motor can be used to drive a pump to circulate the acid mechanically in a cell. The pump may be hydrodynamic (impeller type) or hydrostatic (positive displacement type) or any other type as is well known in the art of pumps. Various examples of these are described in further detail below.

It is possible to mix acid either indirectly (e.g., by using gas bubbles) or

directly by moving the liquid acid itself. Both methods are effective. If the liquid acid itself is pumped directly, a very small flow rate is sufficient to mix the entire bulk of the acid in the cell. Even on a relatively large lead-acid cell, a flow rate of acid of about 100cc/minute for 15 minutes is enough to overcome stratification. With gas mixing, more flow of gas is preferred and a flow of gas up to about twice that of electrolyte flow for the same time interval is preferred. More particularly, a lead acid battery will generally have at least 1000 cc of acid per 100 Ah. That is, a typical 500 Ah cell will have at least five liters of active acid. A reasonable aim of an acid mix system is to move all this acid once during every charge cycle. For example, a 500Ah cell with 5000cc of acid will be mixed at the following combination of acid flow rates and times:

50cc/min for 100 minutes
100cc/min for 50 minutes
200cc/min for 25 minutes

Extra time should be allowed as a safety factor. The use of gas or air bubbles instead of moving the acid directly requires a higher flow rate for the gas or air, up to twice the flow rate as with acid flow. In either case, lower flow rates may be compensated for by longer mix times. Of course, the size and the internal design of the cell, particularly with regard to the ease of circulation is a significant variable. The more freely the acid can circulate, and the better the mixing action, the less flow rate is required. Larger cells need longer mix times.

Hydrodynamic liquid pump. Shown in Figures 1 and 1A is a simple and effective embodiment of the present invention whereby a pump 34, here an axial flow impeller pump, raises the strong acid from the bottom of the cell and discharges it at the top of the cell 10 where it is diluted by mixing with the weak acid. The lead-acid battery cell 10 has a battery cell housing 12 and a cell cover 14 covering the top of the housing to enclose the cell. Within the housing 12 are positive and negative plates 16, 18 respectively, and liquid electrolyte 20 in contact with the plates as is known in the art. In lead acid cells the electrolyte is sulfuric acid. The plates 16, 18 are submerged in the electrolyte 20 which has a top liquid level or surface 22. A

head space 24 is the area between the top liquid level 22 and the cover of the cell 14 and contains gas 26.

The housing 12 (or cell 10) has a lower section 28, and an upper section 30 which includes the upper electrolyte as well as the head space 24. For purposes of this description, the lower section 28 can be considered the section of the cell below the centerline 29 of the electrolyte 20 at its normal operating level, and the upper section 30 the section of the cell above the centerline of the electrolyte 20 at its normal operating level. A vent cap 32 is provided on the cover 14 of the cell 10 which may be a conventional vent orifice as used in a flooded cell or a one-way pressure-relief valve as used in semi-flooded VRLA cells.

During charge of the battery cell 10, the acid 20 stratifies into weak acid (having a lighter specific gravity) at the upper section 30 of the cell 10 and strong acid (heavier specific gravity) at the lower section 28 of the cell. This can be countered by mixing the stronger and weaker acids as discussed below.

A pump 34 suitable for pumping electrolyte 20 is provided. In the present embodiment this pump takes the form of a hydrodynamic pump having an impeller 36 within a pump enclosure 38, and which is mounted within the housing 12 as shown. The term impeller is used broadly herein, suitable impellers can include typical traditional and propeller shaped impellers, or other suitable impeller means capable of moving liquids, e.g., augers, plastic screws, and coiled stainless steel springs.

A small electric motor 40 sealingly mounted above an access opening 42 in the cover 14 is coupled through a coupling 44 or other suitable attachment means to a shaft 46 that extends into the pump enclosure 38 to the impeller 36. A motor enclosure 48 covering the motor 40 and a shaft seal 50 prevents acid and battery gasses from getting into the motor enclosure 48. The shaft 46 also extends through a deflector 51 which diverts the acid out the pump 34 as further described below.

The access opening 42 should be wide enough to allow installation and removal of the pump 34 and attached items as may be necessary for installation and maintenance. To prevent acid 20 from leaking from the access opening 42, a static seal 54 made of suitable seal material such as soft plastic or rubber resistant to electrolyte, or o-ring seals, may be used to seal against the enclosure 38. The impeller 36 of the pump 34 must preferably be below the liquid surface 22 to function properly.

The pump 34 has a first port 52 through which electrolyte 20 is drawn into the pump 34 and a second port 54 through which the pumped electrolyte 20 is discharged back into the housing 12 as illustrated. The first port 52 is positioned in the lower section 28 of the cell 10, and preferably near the bottom of the cell 10 to draw in the strong acid. In the illustrated embodiment, the port 52 is formed as an opening at the bottom of a flow tube 56 connecting the port 52 to the pump enclosure 38 so as to allow the pump 34 to draw electrolyte from the battery cell through the port 52 into the pump 34. The flow tube 56 can be an integral part of the pump 34, or a separate tube attached to the pump.

The second port 54 is positioned in the upper section 30 of the cell 10, and can be located below the electrolyte level 22 or above the electrolyte level 22 as shown. In the illustrated embodiment, the port 54 is formed as an opening at the end of a second flow tube 58 connecting the port 54 to the pump enclosure 38 so as to allow the pump 34 to discharge electrolyte drawn from the lower section of the cell 10 to the upper section of the cell. The flow tube 58 can be an integral part of the pump 34, or a separate tube attached to the pump, or the port 54 can be provided in the enclosure 38 without the tube 54 as shown in dotted line 60.

In operation, when the electric motor 40 is turned on to rotate the impeller 36, the pump 34 draws stronger acid from the lower section 28 of the cell 10 through the port 52 through flow tube 56 and delivers it to the upper section of the cell through the port 54. In this manner the acid of higher specific weight at the lower section is

moved to and mixed with the acid of lower specific gravity at the upper section.

Since the heavier acid settles to the bottom of the cell, it is preferable that the port 52 for the input to the pump be located near the bottom of the cell, or at least near the bottom 19 of the plates 16, 18 so as to mix the acid 20 that is in contact with the plates 16, 18. Some cells 10 have an area 53 below the plates that contains acid as well. As sentiment may collect at the bottom 55 the cell 10, it may be preferable to place the port 52 at a level near the bottom of the plates, but not near the bottom 55 of the cell to avoid drawing in the sentiment. Also, discharging the heavier acid at the upper most level of the electrolyte or above it may aid mixing.

It has been found that strong acid may sink again to the bottom of the cell 10 if it is not quickly mixed. To prevent this from happening, secondary openings or ports 62 may be placed in the side of the flow tube 56 at a level higher than the opening 52 so as draw in weaker acid to pre-mix with the stronger acid from the port 52 before the acid is discharged into the upper section of the cell 10.

This embodiment has worked effectively with a small dc motor drawing 0.5 amps at 3 volts driving a small propeller shaped impeller. Preferred flow rates of acid to be pumped for the typical cell are between about 50 to 100 cc/min. The various other impellers tested ranged from a steel drill bit, a plastic screw and a coiled stainless steel spring. Each pumped enough liquid to de-stratify a large cell in a few minutes. Since several hours are available to carry out a full charge, this method is practical and effective. The flow tube 56 and port 52 may be of any suitable size, 1/16 inch internal diameter tubing being one possibility for cells having little room for the tubing, 1/8 inch internal diameter tubing being possible for use with cells having more room. The shaft and various pieces should be made of acid resistant materials such as plastics, e.g., polypropylene. A suitable material for the shaft seal is viton.

This method of using a separate pump 34 on each cell 10 meets all the

criteria listed above for an improved acid mixing system. It assures even distribution of mixing, no acid short circuits between cells, and a low charge factor as there is no electrolysis and no evaporation. It makes the battery autonomous from the charger, requiring no tubing, no air-pumps and no special chargers. It permits opportunity charging and is compatible with sealed semi-flooded VRLA cells because it does not introduce air into the cells. Therefore, a separate pump on each cell has significant commercial advantages.

The pump shown in Figure 1 is a hydrodynamic type having no valves. It may be run either in forward as discussed above or in reverse where the weaker acid from the upper section 30 is drawn in to the pump 34 through port 54 and discharged to the lower section 28 through the port 52. This reverse operation requires that the discharge port 54 (which now operates as the intake) be below the liquid level 22. Both arrangements, forward and reverse, function effectively.

Hydrostatic liquid pump. An embodiment of the present invention using a hydrostatic type pump with a positive displacement mechanism, of which there are many variations, is now described with reference to Figures 2 and 2A where the cell 10 is similar to that of Figure 1, and elements similar to those of Figure 1 have the same reference numbers.

Shown in Figures 2 and 2A is an embodiment where the pump 34 is a small diaphragm pump 34a driven by a small electric motor 40. The motor 40 turns a crank 64 that moves a flexible diaphragm 66 (which could, as one alternative, be a piston) back and forth in the directions 68 as shown to increase and decrease the volume of the pump chamber 70 in a cyclic manner. Check valves 72a, 72b, mounted inside and outside of the chamber 70 as shown, are used to close the inlet 74a and the outlet 74b of the diaphragm pump chamber 70 so as to permit flow in one direction only as is known in the art for such diaphragm pumps. In the illustrated embodiment the check valves 72a, 72b take the form of flapper valves, other known check valves which may be suitable include umbrella valves and duck

bill valves. As an example, when the diaphragm 66 is moved upwardly by the crank 64, the volume of the chamber 70 increases, drawing in fluid through inlet 74a, the flow of which keeps the check valve 72a open. On the other hand, this same drawing action pulls the check valve 72b closed. The process is reversed when the direction of the diaphragm is reversed, discharging the fluid from the outlet 74b. The motor 40 and crank 64 can be included within an enclosure similar to that described for the previous embodiment.

The diaphragm pump 34a is mounted on a hollow plug 76 sealingly fitted within the access opening 42 having a static seal 54 as described above. The diaphragm pump 34a can be positioned out of the electrolyte and above the cell 10 as shown as the pump can draw the fluid from the cell up into it.

In operation, as in the previously described embodiment of Figure1, the pump 34 draws electrolyte 20 from the lower section 28 of the cell 10 through the port 52 through the flow tube 56 and delivers it to the upper section 30 of the cell through the port 54 (which is also outlet 74b in this case). A suitable particle filter 63 may be incorporated in the input path of the electrolyte in flow tube 56 to prevent malfunction of the pump 34.

Auxiliary feed ports 62 may be provided in the flow tube 56 to pre-mix the strong and weak acids before discharge as previously described. Also, the direction of the flow of acid may be reversed by switching the two check valves of the diagram pump, although the port 54 would need to be extended to the electrolyte 20 by a flow tube (not shown). Both forward and reverse pumping arrangements are believed to function effectively. Materials suitable for use with electrolyte should be used for the various elements of the pump.

Another type of known diaphragm pump uses a solenoid to move the diaphragm within a housing that has opposing check valves mounted in the pump inlet and outlet, all contained in a integral unit. Another variation of this method is

the use of compressed gas to move the diaphragm. In this variation, a source of alternating pressure such as compressed air, either on the battery or otherwise, provides the motive power to drive the pumps. Another type of hydrostatic liquid pump is a piston pump, such miniature pumps having a solenoid operated piston with a spring return.

Piezo-electric pump. Another type of hydrostatic pump is a piezo-electric liquid pump which is a special case of the hydrostatic diaphragm pump already described above. The "motor" and the "diaphragm pump" are combined into one simple unit and driven by an oscillating voltage which flexes the diaphragm. Unlike conventional rotating dc motor/pump systems, there are no brushes or commutators to wear out, no shaft bearings to seize and, most importantly, no shaft seals to leak. Such pumps 34 tend to have a very long service life with great reliability. This is a major advantage in the particular application.

Figure 3 shows a piezo-electric pump 34b in schematic form mounted on a plug 76 which fits in and seals closed the access hole 48 as described above. The Piezo pump has a vibrating diaphragm 66a driven by a driver/controller electronic control 67. As it vibrates, the diaphragm 66a draws electrolyte from the lower section 28 of the cell 10 through the port 52 through the flow tube 56 and delivers it to the upper section 30 of the cell through the port 54. Auxiliary feed ports 62 may be located on the flow tube 56 to pre-mix the strong acid with the weak acid before discharging. A particle filter 63 may be added to the input to prevent malfunction of the pump 34.

A small Piezo pump with a 1 inch diameter diaphragm can pump over 50 cc/minute of liquid at a frequency of 60Hz drawing acid up through a 1/16 inch bore tube 27 inches long (the height of a large fork-lift truck cell). A single, central electronic controller can be used to drive several such pumps simultaneously at similar flow rates and, therefore, provide equal mixing in each cell. The diaphragm of the Piezo pump should be made from a corrosion resistant material, such as

Hastelloy-C, or else have a corrosion resistant covering. The pump can be protected by a particle filter to prevent blockage, but this is not shown for sake of clarity. A maker of piezo pumps that may be suitable for the present invention is PAR Technologies, Inc. of 700 Corporate Drive Newport News, VA 23602, who make a line of piezo pumps, such as model numbers LPD-10S through LPD-400S which may be suitable or adaptable for the present invention.

A variation of this method is where the pump is physically moved away from the opening 42 to a different location on the cell 10 or the battery so that it is connected to the opening by, for example, flexible tubing. This case is not illustrated due to its obviousness.

In alternative and more specific terms, the first port 52, located in the lower section 28 of the cell, can preferably be located in a lower one fourth 57 of the height (at liquid surface 22) of the electrolyte 20.

Hydrostatic gas pump. This embodiment uses a positive displacement pump 34 to pump a gas to the lower section of the cell.

Figure 4 shows a gas diaphragm pump 34c that attaches to individual cells 10 which are similar to that of Figures 2 and 2A, and elements similar to those of Figure 2 and 2A have the same reference numbers (plates 16 and 18 not shown). A small electric motor 40 operates a diaphragm within the diaphragm pump 34c in a manner similar to that described above with reference to Figures 2 and 2A and draws gas from the head space 24 of the cell 10 through the port 54 located in the head space 24 where the gas is discharged from port 52as gas bubbles 80 which rise to the surface 22, mixing the acid. The diaphragm pump is similar to that described in reference to Figure 2A, and operates in a similar manner except that it pumps gas instead of liquid.

The gas 26 in the head space 24 of the cell 10 is nearly saturated with water

so, when it mixes the acid in a flooded cell it will not waste water by evaporation. This method may also be used for "sealed" VRLA cells such as the "semi-flooded" cell described earlier as it does not use oxygen-carrying air but the hydrogen-rich gas in the cell's head space.

A minor variation of this method is to draw the gas from the atmosphere instead of from the cell head space. This is, in essence, a form of air-mixing and will work well for flooded cells where the negative plates are protectively submerged in acid, but not for "sealed" semi-flooded VRLA cells where the negative plates are exposed to the air.

Although the embodiment described above has a separate motor/pump on each cell, it is quite possible to use a common motor/pump, and common head space gas, to mix several cells 10 simultaneously. This can reduce costs and also move the pump 34 to a central position on the battery where more space may be available. The pump may also be moved to a location remote from the cell and attached, for example, by flexible tubing.

With regard to any of the embodiments of the present invention, there are many other physical means by which electrical energy may be translated to a mixing motion in the acid of battery cells. Such other methods include ultrasonic pumps, bellows pumps, thermal pumps (whereby heated fluid is made to rise), magnetically driven circulation (whereby the acid is moved directly by electromagnetic forces), and so on.

The pump of the present invention, no matter which embodiment is practiced, must be turned on and off for operation. For example, in a fork-truck or similar battery cell application, there may typically be a number of cells, each having a pump 34 of any the types described above and which must be turned ON and OFF as needed. This can be done by means as simple as a person operating an electrical

switch to operate the pumps 34, or more sophisticated means such as with the use of an external electronic controller.

The preferred basic minimum role of a controller is to turn the pumps ON during the re-charge cycle and OFF subsequently. In practice, however, the controller may have many other useful functions, including the following:

- Turn the pumps ON automatically when it senses that the battery is on charge.
- Turn the pumps OFF when the battery reaches a higher voltage when mixing is not required.
- Run the pumps continuously or intermittently.
- Give more mixing at week ends and less during week days to conserve water.
- Use fault detection circuits to report faults and prevent consequent damage. For example, it may detect failed pumps by current sensing.

As an example, with reference to Figure 1, a controller 82 as known in the art can be used to turn on the electricity to the pump 34 to mix the acid 20 for two minute periods every thirty minutes during an eight hour charge of the cell 10. This can extends the life of the pump and minimize the use of electricity.

The controller 82 itself may be powered off the battery cell 10 itself and, therefore, be completely self-contained and independent of the battery charger and other outside equipment. This is a vast improvement over prior air-mix systems that must be connected to a compatible charger with an air tube umbilical. With the present invention, batteries may be switched to any charger with confidence that the acid will be mixed properly.

The present invention provides numerous advantages over the prior known devices. In particular, the embodiments described above are believed to have the following advantages:

- Provide for minimal loss of water, either by electrolysis or by evaporation
- Is compatible with opportunity charging by permitting mixing at any time
- Provides uniform mixing in all cells
- Does not cause electrolyte short-circuits between cells
- Does not corrode electrical connectors
- Is not reliant on pumps and umbilical tubes to the charger
- Does not require a special charger
- Is compatible with sealed "Semi-flooded VRLA" cells.

There are other benefits to the present invention as well. One is that the present invention provides a very substantial cost reduction relative to traditional air-mix systems. The other is that for batteries for use outside the United States, where the chargers may not be air-mix compatible, the present will provide a means for acid mixing.

Additional novel means for mixing acid is disclosed in U.S. Patent Application 10/359,760, filed February 6, 2003, the disclosure of which is hereby incorporated herein in its entirety.

It is understood that the foregoing description is intended to describe the preferred embodiments of the present invention and is not intended to limit the invention in any way. This invention is to be read as limited only by the appended claims.

What is claimed is:

1. A battery cell comprising:

a battery cell housing having upper and lower sections;

positive and negative plates positioned within said housing;

liquid electrolyte within said housing and in contact with said positive and negative plates, said electrolyte having a surface level; and

a pump capable of pumping said electrolyte and having first and second ports through which said electrolyte flows into and out of said pump, said first port being positioned in said lower section of said housing within said electrolyte, said second port being positioned within said housing at a level higher than said first port.

2. The battery cell of claim 1 wherein said first port is positioned within a lower one fifth of a height of said electrolyte, and said second port is positioned within or above an upper one fifth of the height of said electrolyte.

3. The battery cell of claim 1 wherein said pump has a first feed tube through which electrolyte can flow between said housing and said pump, said first fed tube including said first port.

4. The battery cell of claim 2 wherein said second port is positioned within said housing above said surface level.

5. The battery cell of claim 3 wherein said first flow tube has at least one additional port through which electrolyte can flow and which is positioned above said first port.

6. The battery cell of claim 1 wherein said pump is positioned outside of said battery cell.

7. The battery cell of claim 1 wherein said pump comprises a piezo-electric liquid pump.

8. The battery cell of claim 1 wherein said pump comprises a hydrodynamic pump.

9. The battery cell of claim 8 wherein said pump comprises a rotatable impeller to move said electrolyte.

10. The battery cell of claim 1 wherein said pump comprises a hydrostatic pump.

11. The battery cell of claim 10 wherein said pump comprises a diaphragm pump wherein a flexible diaphragm is moved to create a flow of electrolyte.

12. The battery cell of claim 1 wherein said pump comprises:

an electric motor mounted outside of said housing;

a shaft extending from said motor through said cell cover into said housing, said shaft being rotatable by said motor; and

an impeller positioned within an enclosure, said impeller being attached to said shaft and rotatable thereby for moving the electrolyte in and out of said first and second ports.

13. The battery cell of claim 8 wherein said pump further comprises one of the following types of impellers: a drill bit, a screw, or a coiled spring.

14. The battery cell of claim 1 further comprising an electric motor configured to drive said pump.

15. The battery cell of claim 14 further comprising an enclosure within which said motor is sealed from battery gasses.

16. A battery cell having means to mix acid within the battery cell; said battery cell comprising:

a battery cell housing having an upper and lower section;

positive and negative plates positioned within said housing;

liquid electrolyte within said housing and in contact with said positive and negative plates;

a cell cover covering a top of said housing;

a pump capable of pumping said electrolyte and having a first port through which said electrolyte flows into said pump, and a second port from which said electrolyte is discharged from said pump, said first port being positioned in said electrolyte in said lower section of said housing, said second port being positioned in said upper section of said housing.

17. The battery cell of claim 16 wherein said first port is positioned in a lower one fourth of a height of said electrolyte.

18. The battery cell of claim 16 wherein said first port is positioned in a lower one fifth of a height of said electrolyte.

19. The battery cell of claim 16 wherein said battery cell has a head space in said upper section of the housing which contains gas, said second port being positioned within said head space.

20. The battery cell of claim 17 wherein said pump comprises a diaphragm for moving said electrolyte.

21. The battery cell of claim 17 wherein said pump comprises an impeller for moving said electrolyte.

22. A method of mixing electrolyte in a battery cell, said method comprising the step of using a pump to draw electrolyte from a first level of said battery through said pump to a second level of said battery where the specific weight of said electrolyte is different from that at said first level.

23. A device for mixing electrolyte in a wet cell battery, said device comprising:

a pump mountable to said cell for pumping electrolyte;

a first port in fluid communication with said pump through which electrolyte can flow between said pump and said housing, said first port being configured to be positioned in a lower section of the battery cell when the device is installed in the battery cell;

a second port in fluid communication with said pump through which electrolyte can flow between said pump and said housing, said first port being configured to be positioned in an upper section of the battery cell when the device is installed in the battery cell; and

an electric motor for driving said pump.

24. A device in accordance with claim 23 wherein said pump comprises a piezo-electric liquid pump.

25. A device in accordance with claim 23 wherein said pump comprises a diaphragm pump.

26. A device in accordance with claim 23 wherein said pump comprises an impeller.

27. A battery cell having means to mix acid within the battery cell; said battery cell comprising:

a battery cell housing having an upper and lower section;

positive and negative plates positioned within said housing;

liquid electrolyte within said housing and in contact with said positive and negative plates, said electrolyte having a surface level;

a cell cover covering a top of said housing;

a head space within said housing between said surface level and said cell cover, said head space containing gas; and

a pump capable of pumping a fluid, said pump having a first port through

which said fluid flows into said pump and a second port from which said fluid is discharged from said pump, one of said first and second ports being positioned in said electrolyte in said lower section of said housing, the other of said first and second ports being positioned in said upper section of said housing.

28. A battery cell in accordance with claim 27 wherein said fluid to be pumped is said electrolyte.

29. A battery cell in accordance with claim 27 wherein said fluid to be pumped is said gas from said head space, said first port being positioned in said head space to draw gas therefrom, said second port being positioned in said lower section of said housing to discharge said gas thereto.

30. A battery cell in accordance with claim 29 wherein said pump comprises a diaphragm pump.

31. A battery cell in accordance with claim 27 wherein said fluid to be pumped is said electrolyte, said first port being positioned in said lower section of said housing to draw electrolyte therefrom, said second port being positioned in said upper section of said housing to discharge said drawn electrolyte thereto.

32. A method of mixing electrolyte in a battery cell, said method comprising the step of using a pump to draw in fluid from a first level within said battery and discharging it to a second level of said battery, wherein one of said first and second levels is in a lower section of the cell, and the other of said first and second levels is within the cell above a liquid surface level of the electrolyte.

33. A method in accordance with claim 32 wherein said fluid is gas, and wherein said method comprises pumping said gas from said above said liquid surface level to said lower section.

34. A method of mixing electrolyte in a battery cell, said method comprising the step of using a pump to draw in gas and discharging it into the electrolyte in a lower section of the cell, there being one said pump for each said cell.

35. A method on accordance with claim 34 wherein said gas is drawn in from outside said battery cell.

36. A method on accordance with claim 34 wherein said gas is drawn in from a head space within said battery cell above the electrolyte.

37. The battery cell of claim 1 wherein said first port is positioned at an electrolyte level near a bottom of said plates.

38. The method of claim 20 further comprising the step of turning on said pump when charging said battery cell.

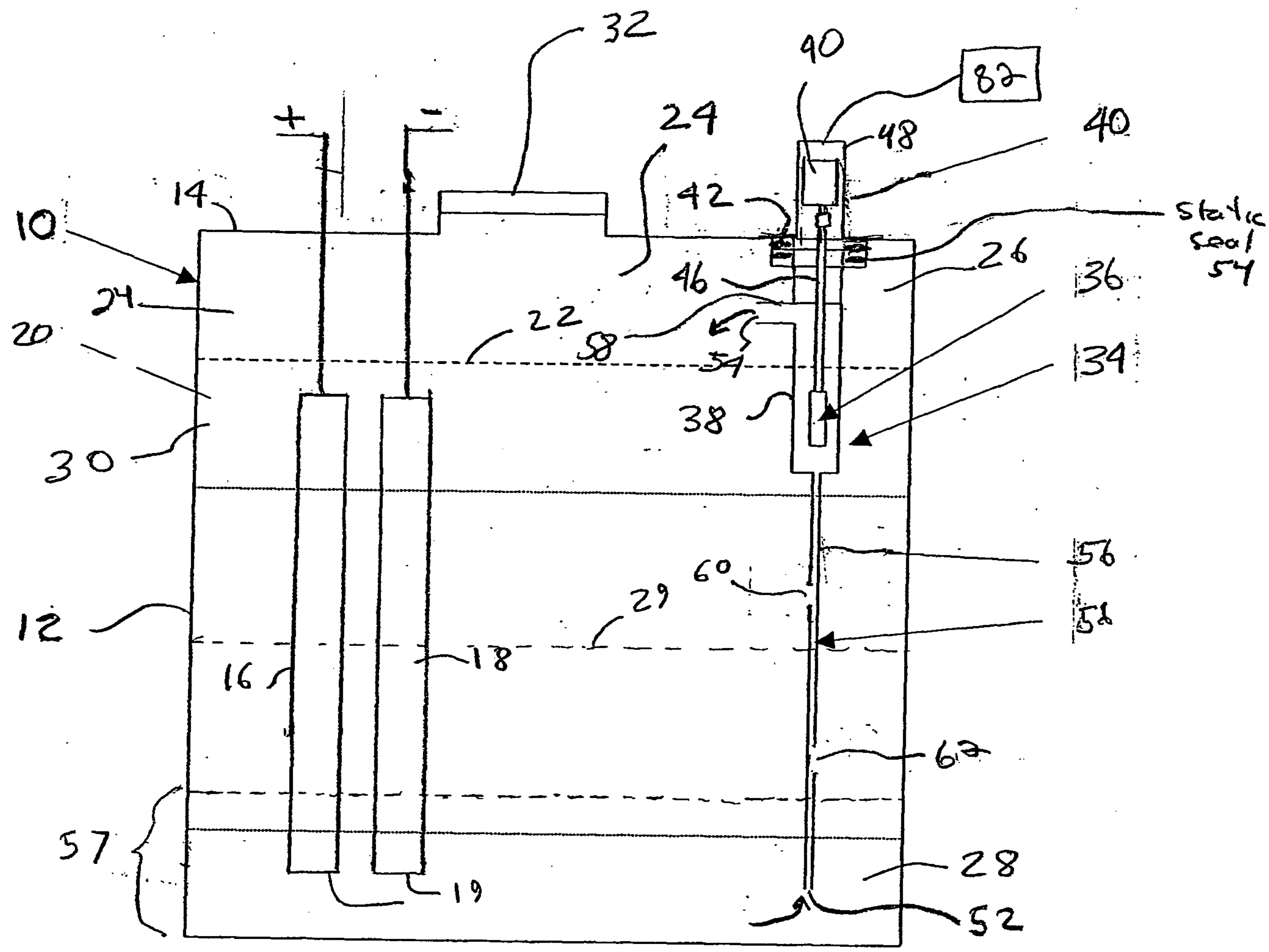
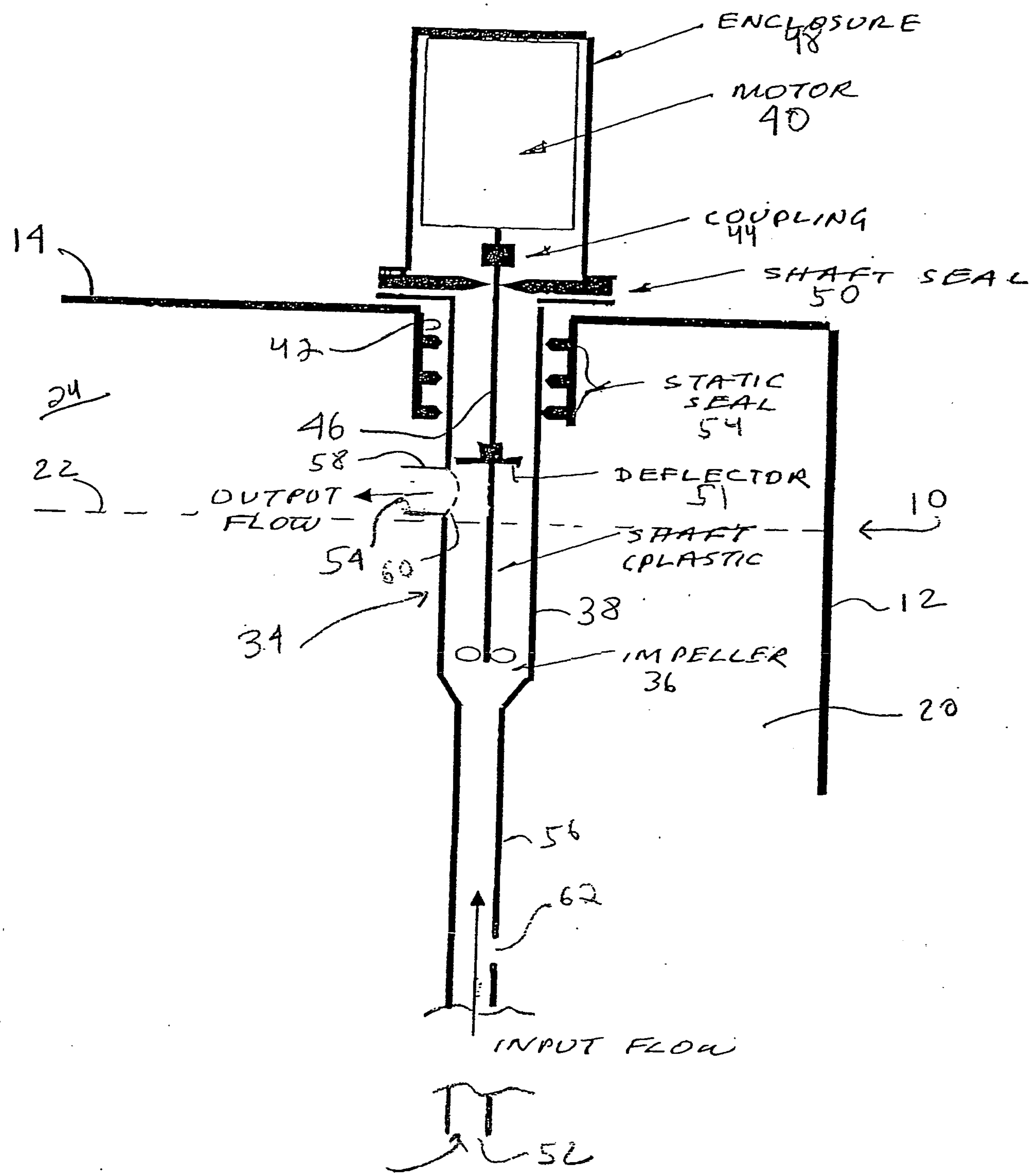


Figure 1: Impeller pump with electric motor

FIG 1A


ENCLOSURE
48
MOTOR
40
COUPLING
44
14
SHAFT SEAL
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42
STATIC
SEAL
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24
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58
DEFLECTOR
51
22
OUTPUT
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60
34
38
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IMPELLER
36
20
56
62
INPUT FLOW
52

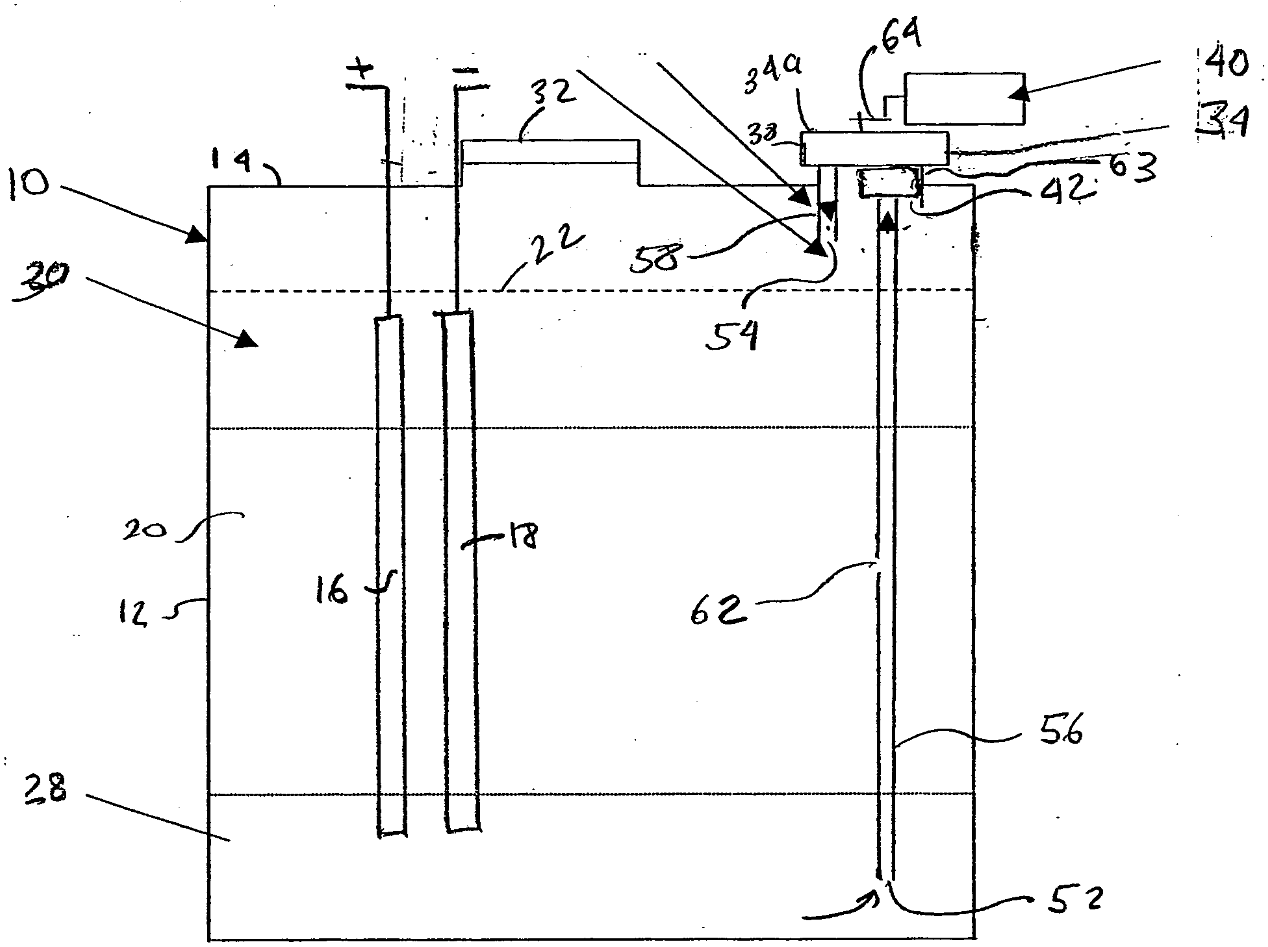

Figure 2: Positive displacement pump, liquid

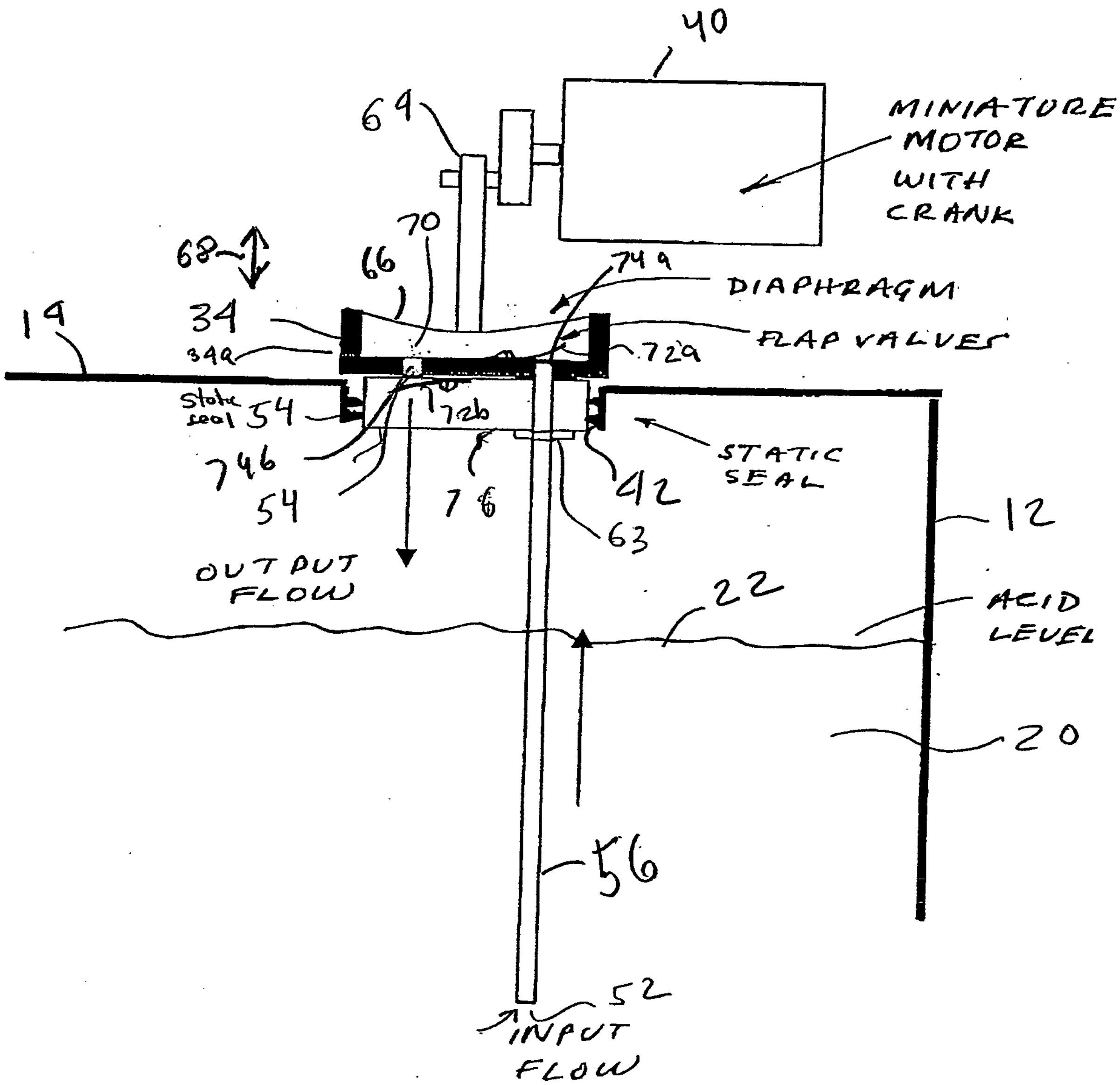
40
MINIATURE MOTOR WITH CRANK
64
70
68
66
74a
DIAPHRAGM
14
34
34a
FLAP VALVES
72a
Static seal 54
72b
74b
54
76
42
STATIC SEAL
63
12
OUTPUT FLOW
22
ACID LEVEL
20
56
52
INPUT FLOW

FIG 2A

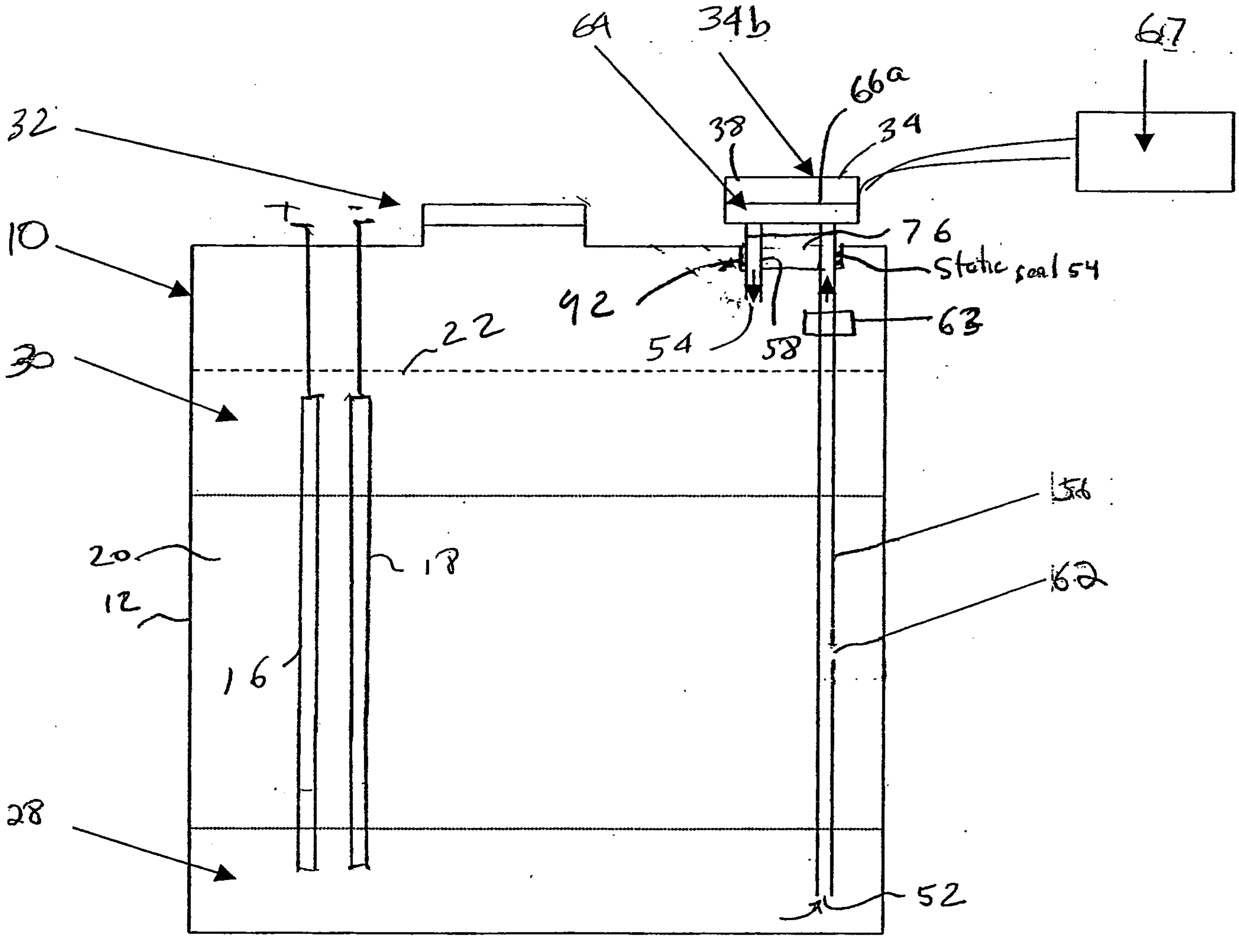

Figure 3: Piezo pump

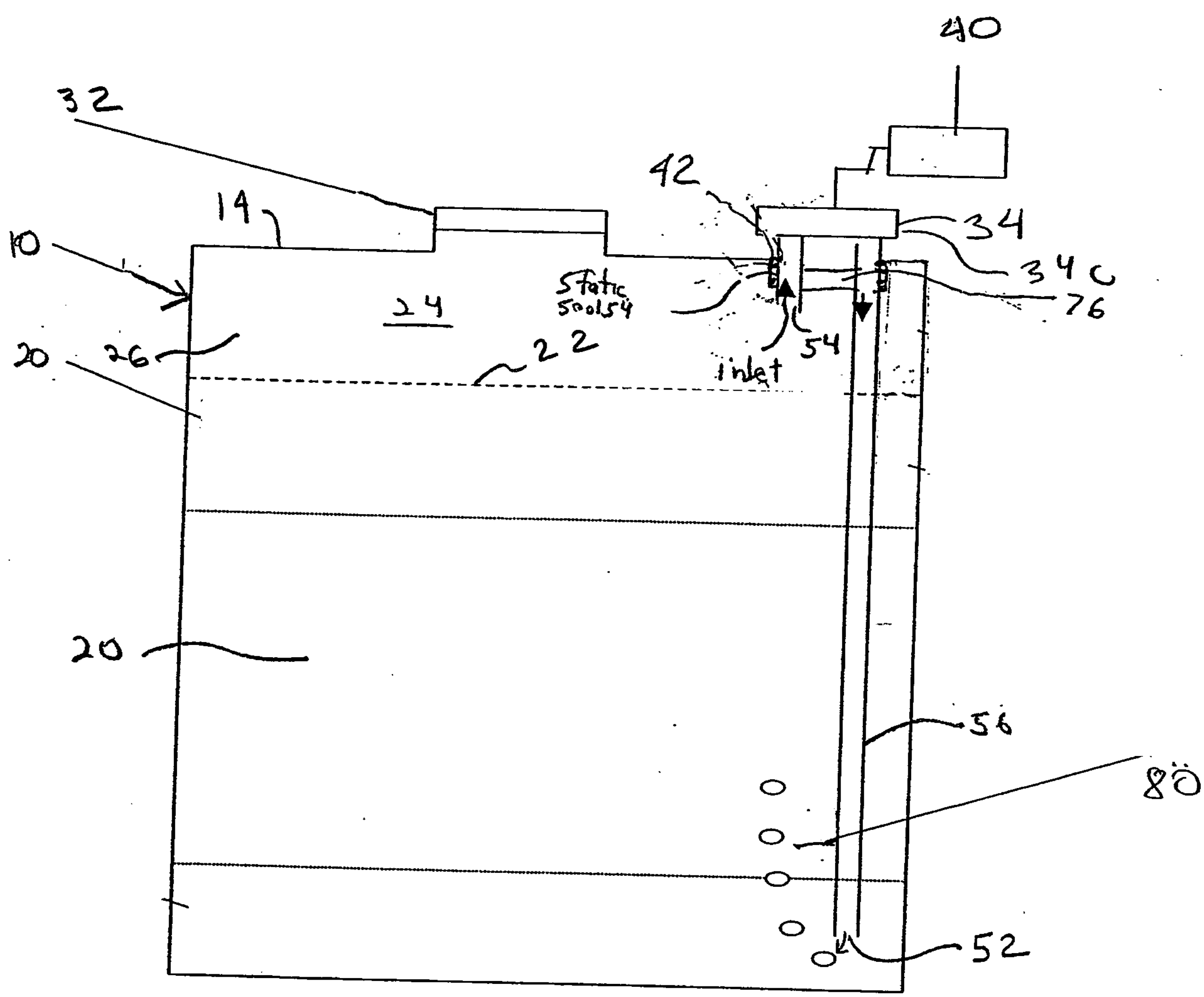

Figure 4: Gas pump

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.
PCT/US03/11726

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER

IPC(7) : H01M 02/38, 02/12
US CL : 429/80, 81, 82, 84

According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC

B. FIELDS SEARCHED

Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols)
U.S. : 429/80, 81, 82, 84

Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched
Non-Patent Literature

Electronic data base consulted during the international search (name of data base and, where practicable, search terms used)

C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category *	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
X	US 4,308,322 A (HAMMAR) 29 December 1981 (29.12.1981), column 2, line 53 - column 3, line 51, Figures 1-3.	1-3, 5, 16-18, 22, 27, 28, 31-34, 36, 37
X	US 5,665,484 A (BOLGER) 09 September 1997 (09.09.1997), column 5, line 21 - column 6, line 38; column 6, lines 40 - 55; Figures 1 & 2.	1, 3-5, 11, 16-18, 20, 22, 23, 25, 27, 28, 30, 32
A	US 4,603,093 A (EDWARDS et al) 29 July 1986 (29.07.1986), The Whole Document.	1-38
A	US 4,221,847 A (INKMANN) 09 September 1980 (09.09.1980), The Whole Document.	1-38
A	US 5,173,374 A (TIEDEMANN et al) 22 December 1992 (29.12.1992), The Whole Document	1-38

☐ Further documents are listed in the continuation of Box C. ☐ See patent family annex.

* Special categories of cited documents:

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"L" document which may throw doubts on priority claim(s) or which is cited to establish the publication date of another citation or other special reason (as specified)

"O" document referring to an oral disclosure, use, exhibition or other means

"P" document published prior to the international filing date but later than the priority date claimed

"T" later document published after the international filing date or priority date and not in conflict with the application but cited to understand the principle or theory underlying the invention

"X" document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered novel or cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is taken alone

"Y" document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is combined with one or more other such documents, such combination being obvious to a person skilled in the art

"&" document member of the same patent family

Date of the actual completion of the international search
08 August 2003 (08.08.2003)

Date of mailing of the international search report
22 AUG 2003

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(12) INTERNATIONAL APPLICATION PUBLISHED UNDER THE PATENT COOPERATION TREATY (PCT)

CORRECTED VERSION

(19) World Intellectual Property Organization
International Bureau

(43) International Publication Date
30 October 2003 (30.10.2003)

PCT

(10) International Publication Number
WO 2003/090306 A1

(51) International Patent Classification[7]: H01M 02/38, 02/12

(21) International Application Number: PCT/US2003/011726

(22) International Filing Date: 16 April 2003 (16.04.2003)

(25) Filing Language: English

(26) Publication Language: English

(30) Priority Data:
60/372,977 16 April 2002 (16.04.2002) US
60/394,695 9 July 2002 (09.07.2002) US

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(81) Designated States (*national*): AE, AG, AL, AM, AT, AU, AZ, BA, BB, BG, BR, BY, BZ, CA, CH, CN, CO, CR, CU, CZ, DE, DK, DM, DZ, EC, EE, ES, FI, GB, GD, GE, GH, GM, HR, HU, ID, IL, IN, IS, JP, KE, KG, KP, KR, KZ, LC, LK, LR, LS, LT, LU, LV, MA, MD, MG, MK, MN, MW, MX, MZ, NI, NO, NZ, OM, PH, PL, PT, RO, RU, SC, SD, SE, SG, SK, SL, TJ, TM, TN, TR, TT, TZ, UA, UG, US, UZ, VC, VN, YU, ZA, ZM, ZW.

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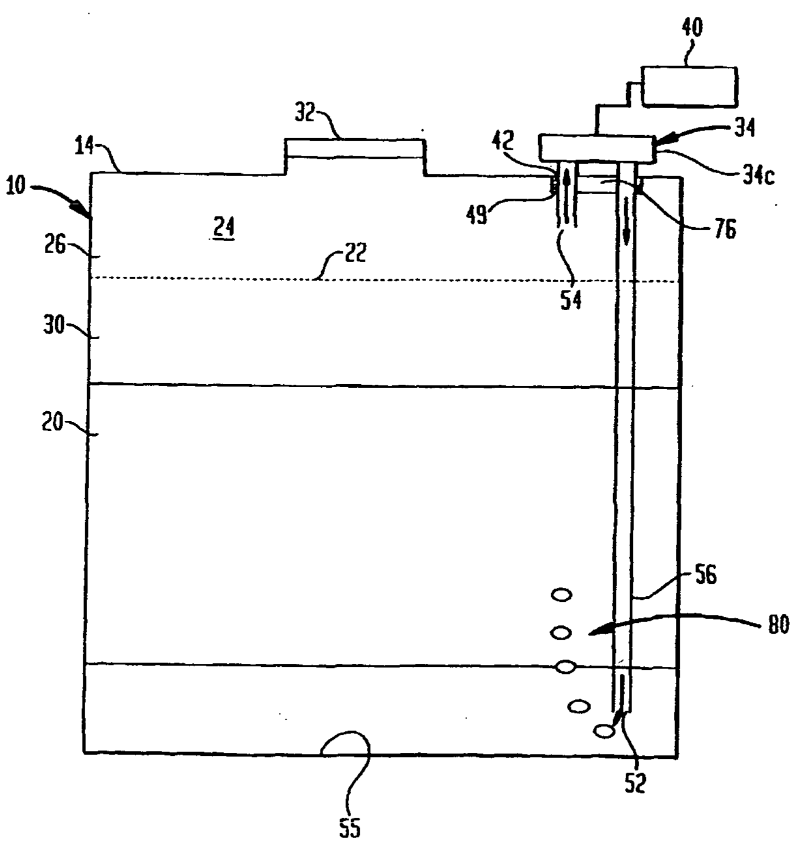
(54) Title: IMPROVED ELECTROLYTE MIXING IN WET CELL BATTERIES



(57) Abstract: A method of mixing electrolyte in a wet cell battery (10) using a pump (34) to move electrolyte (20) from a first level of said battery to a second level of said battery where the specific weight of the electrolyte is different from that of the first level. A device for mixing the electrolyte using a pump (34) and a battery cell (10) having such a device is also provided. The method of the present invention also provides an embodiment for pumping gas into the cell to mix the electrolyte.

WO 2003/090306 A1

(84) Designated States *(regional)*: ARIPO patent (GH, GM, KE, LS, MW, MZ, SD, SL, SZ, TZ, UG, ZM, ZW), Eurasian patent (AM, AZ, BY, KG, KZ, MD, RU, TJ, TM), European patent (AT, BE, BG, CH, CY, CZ, DE, DK, EE, ES, FI, FR, GB, GR, HU, IE, IT, LU, MC, NL, PT, RO, SE, SI, SK, TR), OAPI patent (BF, BJ, CF, CG, CI, CM, GA, GN, GQ, GW, ML, MR, NE, SN, TD, TG).

Declaration under Rule 4.17:
— *of inventorship (Rule 4.17(iv)) for US only*

Published:
— *with international search report*

(48) Date of publication of this corrected version:
12 February 2004

(15) Information about Correction:
see PCT Gazette No. 07/2004 of 12 February 2004, Section II

For two-letter codes and other abbreviations, refer to the "Guidance Notes on Codes and Abbreviations" appearing at the beginning of each regular issue of the PCT Gazette.

IMPROVED ELECTROLYTE MIXING IN WET CELL BATTERIES

Cross Reference to Related Application

This application claims the benefit of U.S. Provisional Application Numbers 60/372,977 filed April 16, 2002 and 60/394,695 filed July 9, 2002, the disclosures of which are hereby incorporated by reference herein.

Background

1. Field of the Invention

The present invention relates generally to wet cell batteries, such as flooded lead acid batteries, and more particularly to the mixing of electrolyte within the batteries to minimize electrolyte stratification.

2. Background of the Invention

Flooded lead-acid batteries in deep-cycle service risk acid stratification when strong acid emerging from the plates during charge sinks to the bottom of the cells. Electrolyte stratification is believed to be due to the changes of the specific weight of the sulfuric acid during charge and discharge of the battery. For example, during charge, concentrated sulfuric acid is released from the active material in the plates, increasing the local concentration of the acid (stronger concentration). Having a higher specific weight, the strong acid moves by convection and collects near the lower part of the battery cell. The stronger acid can cause damage to the negative plates and must be eliminated by mixing with the weak acid at the top of the cells. Moreover, acid readings taken of the battery after charging may be incorrect due to this phenomena.

One remedy for stratification used for many years is overcharging. The battery cells are simply overcharged with about 20% more ampere-hours than consumed during the preceding discharge, yielding a so-called "charge factor" of 1.20. This causes bubbles to form that mix the electrolyte as they float up to the surface. The amount of overcharge necessary, however, causes higher energy costs, more positive grid corrosion and more water loss, all of which leads to higher

maintenance.

In recent years, with the development of low-maintenance batteries, less water loss in the battery is required. Thus, improved methods of acid mixing have been accomplished which use lower charge factors. Two methods that have become commercially important are pulse charging and air-mixing.

Pulse charging is a method whereby the battery charger gives the battery short pulses of relatively high current to cause intermittent gassing in the cells. This method can reduce charge factors to about 1.06.

The major advantage of pulse charging is its simplicity; it requires no additional hardware on the battery or the charger as the mixing is controlled simply by modifying the electronic controls in the charger. Another advantage is that there cannot be an unequal distribution of the mixing effect since all the cells will always get the same amount of gassing.

A disadvantage of pulse charging is that the battery needs a special charger so that if a new battery is purchased, an expensive new charger must also be purchased. Also, since pulse charging can only be applied toward the end of the charging period, it is not compatible with "opportunity charging" where a battery is partially re-charged several times during a shift so as to increase its effective capacity.

Air-mixing is a method whereby air is bubbled into the cell to mix the acid; this method can reduce the charge factor to 1.04 or less. An air pump is usually installed inside the charger and connected by a long tube to a manifold on the battery from which air is fed by small-bore tubes to the bottom of each cell.

A major advantage of an air-mix system is that it has the potential for very low charge factors because it does not involve electrolysis. In areas with dry ambient

air, however, the dry air used for mixing can cause some evaporation of the water. Another advantage is that it can be used at any time and is, therefore, compatible with opportunity charging.

A disadvantage with an air-mix system, however, is that it can have poor distribution of air flow between cells. Another disadvantage is that the air pump is in the charger. This air pump is connected to the battery via a long tube with a quick-disconnect coupling so that the battery may be disconnected from the charger before being driven away. The problem is that the operator must now disconnect two couplings; one for the electrical charging and one for the air-mix. Sometimes the operator may forget and damage the tubing and the couplings. One solution to this problem is a dual coupling whereby the electrical and air-mix couplings are made simultaneously in one coupling. This has helped, but if acid gets into the air-mix tubing to the coupling, it can drip on to the electrical connections and corrode them. In practice, the battery will often fail to get a proper charge which is a serious fault if there is no substitute battery.

Presently known acid mixing means also have the disadvantage in that they are not suitable for "semi-flooded" cells. A "semi-flooded" cell (see U.S. Patent No. 6,274,263 to W. Jones) is a "sealed", valve regulated lead-acid cell (VRLA) in which the electrolyte is free liquid and not absorbed in a gel or absorbed glass mat (AGM) material as traditional VRLA batteries. Since it is designed to be a maintenance-free product, it cannot use pulse charging because of the higher charge factor, and cannot use air mixing because oxygen in air will discharge the negative plates. Thus an improved form of electrolyte mixing is needed which can also be used for "semi-flooded" batteries.

As presently known means for acid mixing have disadvantages, an improved means is desirable. Such a system that would be of commercial benefit and is the intent of the present invention.

Summary of the Invention:

The present invention provides an improved means of mixing acid in a battery cell that avoids many of the disadvantages of prior known mixing devices. Broadly, the method of the present invention provides for the mixing of electrolyte in a battery cell using a pump to draw fluid from one level of the battery and discharging it to another level. In one embodiment the fluid pumped is the electrolyte which is pumped from a level in the battery where the acid has one concentration to a level where the acid has a different concentration, thereby mixing the acids of the two different concentrations. By this means the acids of different specific weights mix to minimize stratification of the electrolyte. In another embodiment, the fluid pumped is gas which, when pumped into the electrolyte, mixes the acid.

The present invention also provides a battery cell having means to mix the acid. The battery cell includes a battery cell housing having upper and lower sections; positive and negative plates positioned within the housing; liquid electrolyte within the housing and in contact with the positive and negative plates; and a pump capable of pumping the electrolyte and having first and second ports through which the electrolyte flows into and out of the pump, the first port being positioned in the lower section of the housing within the electrolyte and the second port being positioned at a level higher than the first port. In another embodiment, the pump moves gas from a gas space above the electrolyte into the electrolyte to mix the acid.

The present invention further provides a device for mixing the acid in a battery cell.

Brief Descriptions of the Drawings:

The foregoing summary, as well as the following detailed description will be better understood when read in conjunction with the figures attached hereto. For the purpose of illustrating the invention, there is shown in the drawings several embodiments. It is understood, however, that this invention is not limited to the

precise arrangement and instrumentalities shown.

Figure 1 shows one embodiment of the invention using an impeller pump;

Figure 1A show a more detailed view of the pump in Figure 1;

Figure 2 shows another embodiment of the present invention using a positive displacement pump to move the electrolyte;

Figure 2A show a more detailed view of the pump in Figure 2;

Figure 3 shows a third embodiment of the present invention using a piezo pump to move the electrolyte; and

Figure 4 shows a fourth embodiment of the present invention using a displacement pump to move gas within the battery cell.

Detailed Description of the Invention:

The present invention provides a novel method and device for mixing electrolyte in wet cell batteries, e.g., flooded batteries. (The term "electrolyte" and "acid" are used interchangeably herein). The invention also provides a novel battery cell having such capabilities. One application for the present invention is deep-cycle lead-acid batteries as used in fork-lift trucks although it can be applied to any cycling application such as solar batteries, electric vehicles and so on. It is one aim of the present invention to mix the acid in all types of flooded cells including conventional "flooded" cells and also the new, sealed "semi-flooded" cells. Described below are several powered devices to mix acid effectively with little or no water wastage.

In the present invention, a separate individual pump is attached to each cell so that each cell receives ideal mixing with no distribution problems. For example, a small electric motor can be used to drive a pump to circulate the acid mechanically in a cell. The pump may be hydrodynamic (impeller type) or hydrostatic (positive displacement type) or any other type as is well known in the art of pumps. Various examples of these are described in further detail below.

It is possible to mix acid either indirectly (e.g., by using gas bubbles) or

directly by moving the liquid acid itself. Both methods are effective. If the liquid acid itself is pumped directly, a very small flow rate is sufficient to mix the entire bulk of the acid in the cell. Even on a relatively large lead-acid cell, a flow rate of acid of about 100cc/minute for 15 minutes is enough to overcome stratification. With gas mixing, more flow of gas is preferred and a flow of gas up to about twice that of electrolyte flow for the same time interval is preferred. More particularly, a lead acid battery will generally have at least 1000 cc of acid per 100 Ah. That is, a typical 500 Ah cell will have at least five liters of active acid. A reasonable aim of an acid mix system is to move all this acid once during every charge cycle. For example, a 500Ah cell with 5000cc of acid will be mixed at the following combination of acid flow rates and times:

50cc/min for 100 minutes
100cc/min for 50 minutes
200cc/min for 25 minutes

Extra time should be allowed as a safety factor. The use of gas or air bubbles instead of moving the acid directly requires a higher flow rate for the gas or air, up to twice the flow rate as with acid flow. In either case, lower flow rates may be compensated for by longer mix times. Of course, the size and the internal design of the cell, particularly with regard to the ease of circulation is a significant variable. The more freely the acid can circulate, and the better the mixing action, the less flow rate is required. Larger cells need longer mix times.

Hydrodynamic liquid pump. Shown in Figures 1 and 1A is a simple and effective embodiment of the present invention whereby a pump 34, here an axial flow impeller pump, raises the strong acid from the bottom of the cell and discharges it at the top of the cell 10 where it is diluted by mixing with the weak acid. The lead-acid battery cell 10 has a battery cell housing 12 and a cell cover 14 covering the top of the housing to enclose the cell. Within the housing 12 are positive and negative plates 16, 18 respectively, and liquid electrolyte 20 in contact with the plates as is known in the art. In lead acid cells the electrolyte is sulfuric acid. The plates 16, 18 are submerged in the electrolyte 20 which has a top liquid level or surface 22. A

head space 24 is the area between the top liquid level 22 and the cover of the cell 14 and contains gas 26.

The housing 12 (or cell 10) has a lower section 28, and an upper section 30 which includes the upper electrolyte as well as the head space 24. For purposes of this description, the lower section 28 can be considered the section of the cell below the centerline 29 of the electrolyte 20 at its normal operating level, and the upper section 30 the section of the cell above the centerline of the electrolyte 20 at its normal operating level. A vent cap 32 is provided on the cover 14 of the cell 10 which may be a conventional vent orifice as used in a flooded cell or a one-way pressure-relief valve as used in semi-flooded VRLA cells.

During charge of the battery cell 10, the acid 20 stratifies into weak acid (having a lighter specific gravity) at the upper section 30 of the cell 10 and strong acid (heavier specific gravity) at the lower section 28 of the cell. This can be countered by mixing the stronger and weaker acids as discussed below.

A pump 34 suitable for pumping electrolyte 20 is provided. In the present embodiment this pump takes the form of a hydrodynamic pump having an impeller 36 within a pump enclosure 38, and which is mounted within the housing 12 as shown. The term impeller is used broadly herein, suitable impellers can include typical traditional and propeller shaped impellers, or other suitable impeller means capable of moving liquids, e.g., augers, plastic screws, and coiled stainless steel springs.

A small electric motor 40 sealingly mounted above an access opening 42 in the cover 14 is coupled through a coupling 44 or other suitable attachment means to a shaft 46 that extends into the pump enclosure 38 to the impeller 36. A motor enclosure 48 covering the motor 40 and a shaft seal 50 prevents acid and battery gasses from getting into the motor enclosure 48. The shaft 46 also extends through a deflector 51 which diverts the acid out the pump 34 as further described below.

The access opening 42 should be wide enough to allow installation and removal of the pump 34 and attached items as may be necessary for installation and maintenance. To prevent acid 20 from leaking from the access opening 42, a static seal 54 made of suitable seal material such as soft plastic or rubber resistant to electrolyte, or o-ring seals, may be used to seal against the enclosure 38. The impeller 36 of the pump 34 must preferably be below the liquid surface 22 to function properly.

The pump 34 has a first port 52 through which electrolyte 20 is drawn into the pump 34 and a second port 54 through which the pumped electrolyte 20 is discharged back into the housing 12 as illustrated. The first port 52 is positioned in the lower section 28 of the cell 10, and preferably near the bottom of the cell 10 to draw in the strong acid. In the illustrated embodiment, the port 52 is formed as an opening at the bottom of a flow tube 56 connecting the port 52 to the pump enclosure 38 so as to allow the pump 34 to draw electrolyte from the battery cell through the port 52 into the pump 34. The flow tube 56 can be an integral part of the pump 34, or a separate tube attached to the pump.

The second port 54 is positioned in the upper section 30 of the cell 10, and can be located below the electrolyte level 22 or above the electrolyte level 22 as shown. In the illustrated embodiment, the port 54 is formed as an opening at the end of a second flow tube 58 connecting the port 54 to the pump enclosure 38 so as to allow the pump 34 to discharge electrolyte drawn from the lower section of the cell 10 to the upper section of the cell. The flow tube 58 can be an integral part of the pump 34, or a separate tube attached to the pump, or the port 54 can be provided in the enclosure 38 without the tube 54 as shown in dotted line 60.

In operation, when the electric motor 40 is turned on to rotate the impeller 36, the pump 34 draws stronger acid from the lower section 28 of the cell 10 through the port 52 through flow tube 56 and delivers it to the upper section of the cell through the port 54. In this manner the acid of higher specific weight at the lower section is

moved to and mixed with the acid of lower specific gravity at the upper section.

Since the heavier acid settles to the bottom of the cell, it is preferable that the port 52 for the input to the pump be located near the bottom of the cell, or at least near the bottom 19 of the plates 16, 18 so as to mix the acid 20 that is in contact with the plates 16, 18. Some cells 10 have an area 53 below the plates that contains acid as well. As sentiment may collect at the bottom 55 the cell 10, it may be preferable to place the port 52 at a level near the bottom of the plates, but not near the bottom 55 of the cell to avoid drawing in the sentiment. Also, discharging the heavier acid at the upper most level of the electrolyte or above it may aid mixing.

It has been found that strong acid may sink again to the bottom of the cell 10 if it is not quickly mixed. To prevent this from happening, secondary openings or ports 62 may be placed in the side of the flow tube 56 at a level higher than the opening 52 so as draw in weaker acid to pre-mix with the stronger acid from the port 52 before the acid is discharged into the upper section of the cell 10.

This embodiment has worked effectively with a small dc motor drawing 0.5 amps at 3 volts driving a small propeller shaped impeller. Preferred flow rates of acid to be pumped for the typical cell are between about 50 to 100 cc/min. The various other impellers tested ranged from a steel drill bit, a plastic screw and a coiled stainless steel spring. Each pumped enough liquid to de-stratify a large cell in a few minutes. Since several hours are available to carry out a full charge, this method is practical and effective. The flow tube 56 and port 52 may be of any suitable size, 1/16 inch internal diameter tubing being one possibility for cells having little room for the tubing, 1/8 inch internal diameter tubing being possible for use with cells having more room. The shaft and various pieces should be made of acid resistant materials such as plastics, e.g., polypropylene. A suitable material for the shaft seal is viton.

This method of using a separate pump 34 on each cell 10 meets all the

criteria listed above for an improved acid mixing system. It assures even distribution of mixing, no acid short circuits between cells, and a low charge factor as there is no electrolysis and no evaporation. It makes the battery autonomous from the charger, requiring no tubing, no air-pumps and no special chargers. It permits opportunity charging and is compatible with sealed semi-flooded VRLA cells because it does not introduce air into the cells. Therefore, a separate pump on each cell has significant commercial advantages.

The pump shown in Figure 1 is a hydrodynamic type having no valves. It may be run either in forward as discussed above or in reverse where the weaker acid from the upper section 30 is drawn in to the pump 34 through port 54 and discharged to the lower section 28 through the port 52. This reverse operation requires that the discharge port 54 (which now operates as the intake) be below the liquid level 22. Both arrangements, forward and reverse, function effectively.

Hydrostatic liquid pump. An embodiment of the present invention using a hydrostatic type pump with a positive displacement mechanism, of which there are many variations, is now described with reference to Figures 2 and 2A where the cell 10 is similar to that of Figure 1, and elements similar to those of Figure 1 have the same reference numbers.

Shown in Figures 2 and 2A is an embodiment where the pump 34 is a small diaphragm pump 34a driven by a small electric motor 40. The motor 40 turns a crank 64 that moves a flexible diaphragm 66 (which could, as one alternative, be a piston) back and forth in the directions 68 as shown to increase and decrease the volume of the pump chamber 70 in a cyclic manner. Check valves 72a, 72b, mounted inside and outside of the chamber 70 as shown, are used to close the inlet 74a and the outlet 74b of the diaphragm pump chamber 70 so as to permit flow in one direction only as is known in the art for such diaphragm pumps. In the illustrated embodiment the check valves 72a, 72b take the form of flapper valves, other known check valves which may be suitable include umbrella valves and duck

bill valves. As an example, when the diaphragm 66 is moved upwardly by the crank 64, the volume of the chamber 70 increases, drawing in fluid through inlet 74a, the flow of which keeps the check valve 72a open. On the other hand, this same drawing action pulls the check valve 72b closed. The process is reversed when the direction of the diaphragm is reversed, discharging the fluid from the outlet 74b. The motor 40 and crank 64 can be included within an enclosure similar to that described for the previous embodiment.

The diaphragm pump 34a is mounted on a hollow plug 76 sealingly fitted within the access opening 42 having a static seal 54 as described above. The diaphragm pump 34a can be positioned out of the electrolyte and above the cell 10 as shown as the pump can draw the fluid from the cell up into it.

In operation, as in the previously described embodiment of Figure1, the pump 34 draws electrolyte 20 from the lower section 28 of the cell 10 through the port 52 through the flow tube 56 and delivers it to the upper section 30 of the cell through the port 54 (which is also outlet 74b in this case). A suitable particle filter 63 may be incorporated in the input path of the electrolyte in flow tube 56 to prevent malfunction of the pump 34.

Auxiliary feed ports 62 may be provided in the flow tube 56 to pre-mix the strong and weak acids before discharge as previously described. Also, the direction of the flow of acid may be reversed by switching the two check valves of the diagram pump, although the port 54 would need to be extended to the electrolyte 20 by a flow tube (not shown). Both forward and reverse pumping arrangements are believed to function effectively. Materials suitable for use with electrolyte should be used for the various elements of the pump.

Another type of known diaphragm pump uses a solenoid to move the diaphragm within a housing that has opposing check valves mounted in the pump inlet and outlet, all contained in a integral unit. Another variation of this method is

the use of compressed gas to move the diaphragm. In this variation, a source of alternating pressure such as compressed air, either on the battery or otherwise, provides the motive power to drive the pumps. Another type of hydrostatic liquid pump is a piston pump, such miniature pumps having a solenoid operated piston with a spring return.

Piezo-electric pump. Another type of hydrostatic pump is a piezo-electric liquid pump which is a special case of the hydrostatic diaphragm pump already described above. The "motor" and the "diaphragm pump" are combined into one simple unit and driven by an oscillating voltage which flexes the diaphragm. Unlike conventional rotating dc motor/pump systems, there are no brushes or commutators to wear out, no shaft bearings to seize and, most importantly, no shaft seals to leak. Such pumps 34 tend to have a very long service life with great reliability. This is a major advantage in the particular application.

Figure 3 shows a piezo-electric pump 34b in schematic form mounted on a plug 76 which fits in and seals closed the access hole 48 as described above. The Piezo pump has a vibrating diaphragm 66a driven by a driver/controller electronic control 67. As it vibrates, the diaphragm 66a draws electrolyte from the lower section 28 of the cell 10 through the port 52 through the flow tube 56 and delivers it to the upper section 30 of the cell through the port 54. Auxiliary feed ports 62 may be located on the flow tube 56 to pre-mix the strong acid with the weak acid before discharging. A particle filter 63 may be added to the input to prevent malfunction of the pump 34.

A small Piezo pump with a 1 inch diameter diaphragm can pump over 50 cc/minute of liquid at a frequency of 60Hz drawing acid up through a 1/16 inch bore tube 27 inches long (the height of a large fork-lift truck cell). A single, central electronic controller can be used to drive several such pumps simultaneously at similar flow rates and, therefore, provide equal mixing in each cell. The diaphragm of the Piezo pump should be made from a corrosion resistant material, such as

Hastelloy-C, or else have a corrosion resistant covering. The pump can be protected by a particle filter to prevent blockage, but this is not shown for sake of clarity. A maker of piezo pumps that may be suitable for the present invention is PAR Technologies, Inc. of 700 Corporate Drive Newport News, VA 23602, who make a line of piezo pumps, such as model numbers LPD-10S through LPD-400S which may be suitable or adaptable for the present invention.

A variation of this method is where the pump is physically moved away from the opening 42 to a different location on the cell 10 or the battery so that it is connected to the opening by, for example, flexible tubing. This case is not illustrated due to its obviousness.

In alternative and more specific terms, the first port 52, located in the lower section 28 of the cell, can preferably be located in a lower one fourth 57 of the height (at liquid surface 22) of the electrolyte 20.

Hydrostatic gas pump. This embodiment uses a positive displacement pump 34 to pump a gas to the lower section of the cell.

Figure 4 shows a gas diaphragm pump 34c that attaches to individual cells 10 which are similar to that of Figures 2 and 2A, and elements similar to those of Figure 2 and 2A have the same reference numbers (plates 16 and 18 not shown). A small electric motor 40 operates a diaphragm within the diaphragm pump 34c in a manner similar to that described above with reference to Figures 2 and 2A and draws gas from the head space 24 of the cell 10 through the port 54 located in the head space 24 where the gas is discharged from port 52as gas bubbles 80 which rise to the surface 22, mixing the acid. The diaphragm pump is similar to that described in reference to Figure 2A, and operates in a similar manner except that it pumps gas instead of liquid.

The gas 26 in the head space 24 of the cell 10 is nearly saturated with water

so, when it mixes the acid in a flooded cell it will not waste water by evaporation. This method may also be used for "sealed" VRLA cells such as the "semi-flooded" cell described earlier as it does not use oxygen-carrying air but the hydrogen-rich gas in the cell's head space.

A minor variation of this method is to draw the gas from the atmosphere instead of from the cell head space. This is, in essence, a form of air-mixing and will work well for flooded cells where the negative plates are protectively submerged in acid, but not for "sealed" semi-flooded VRLA cells where the negative plates are exposed to the air.

Although the embodiment described above has a separate motor/pump on each cell, it is quite possible to use a common motor/pump, and common head space gas, to mix several cells 10 simultaneously. This can reduce costs and also move the pump 34 to a central position on the battery where more space may be available. The pump may also be moved to a location remote from the cell and attached, for example, by flexible tubing.

With regard to any of the embodiments of the present invention, there are many other physical means by which electrical energy may be translated to a mixing motion in the acid of battery cells. Such other methods include ultrasonic pumps, bellows pumps, thermal pumps (whereby heated fluid is made to rise), magnetically driven circulation (whereby the acid is moved directly by electromagnetic forces), and so on.

The pump of the present invention, no matter which embodiment is practiced, must be turned on and off for operation. For example, in a fork-truck or similar battery cell application, there may typically be a number of cells, each having a pump 34 of any the types described above and which must be turned ON and OFF as needed. This can be done by means as simple as a person operating an electrical

switch to operate the pumps 34, or more sophisticated means such as with the use of an external electronic controller.

The preferred basic minimum role of a controller is to turn the pumps ON during the re-charge cycle and OFF subsequently. In practice, however, the controller may have many other useful functions, including the following:

- Turn the pumps ON automatically when it senses that the battery is on charge.
- Turn the pumps OFF when the battery reaches a higher voltage when mixing is not required.
- Run the pumps continuously or intermittently.
- Give more mixing at week ends and less during week days to conserve water.
- Use fault detection circuits to report faults and prevent consequent damage. For example, it may detect failed pumps by current sensing.

As an example, with reference to Figure 1, a controller 82 as known in the art can be used to turn on the electricity to the pump 34 to mix the acid 20 for two minute periods every thirty minutes during an eight hour charge of the cell 10. This can extends the life of the pump and minimize the use of electricity.

The controller 82 itself may be powered off the battery cell 10 itself and, therefore, be completely self-contained and independent of the battery charger and other outside equipment. This is a vast improvement over prior air-mix systems that must be connected to a compatible charger with an air tube umbilical. With the present invention, batteries may be switched to any charger with confidence that the acid will be mixed properly.

The present invention provides numerous advantages over the prior known devices. In particular, the embodiments described above are believed to have the following advantages:

- Provide for minimal loss of water, either by electrolysis or by evaporation
- Is compatible with opportunity charging by permitting mixing at any time
- Provides uniform mixing in all cells
- Does not cause electrolyte short-circuits between cells
- Does not corrode electrical connectors
- Is not reliant on pumps and umbilical tubes to the charger
- Does not require a special charger
- Is compatible with sealed “Semi-flooded VRLA” cells.

There are other benefits to the present invention as well. One is that the present invention provides a very substantial cost reduction relative to traditional air-mix systems. The other is that for batteries for use outside the United States, where the chargers may not be air-mix compatible, the present will provide a means for acid mixing.

Additional novel means for mixing acid is disclosed in U.S. Patent Application 10/359,760, filed February 6, 2003, the disclosure of which is hereby incorporated herein in its entirety.

It is understood that the foregoing description is intended to describe the preferred embodiments of the present invention and is not intended to limit the invention in any way. This invention is to be read as limited only by the appended claims.

What is claimed is:

1. A battery cell comprising:

a battery cell housing having upper and lower sections;

positive and negative plates positioned within said housing;

liquid electrolyte within said housing and in contact with said positive and negative plates, said electrolyte having a surface level; and

a pump capable of pumping said electrolyte and having first and second ports through which said electrolyte flows into and out of said pump, said first port being positioned in said lower section of said housing within said electrolyte, said second port being positioned within said housing at a level higher than said first port.

2. The battery cell of claim 1 wherein said first port is positioned within a lower one fifth of a height of said electrolyte, and said second port is positioned within or above an upper one fifth of the height of said electrolyte.

3. The battery cell of claim 1 wherein said pump has a first feed tube through which electrolyte can flow between said housing and said pump, said first fed tube including said first port.

4. The battery cell of claim 2 wherein said second port is positioned within said housing above said surface level.

5. The battery cell of claim 3 wherein said first flow tube has at least one additional port through which electrolyte can flow and which is positioned above said first port.

6. The battery cell of claim 1 wherein said pump is positioned outside of said battery cell.

7. The battery cell of claim 1 wherein said pump comprises a piezo-electric liquid pump.

8. The battery cell of claim 1 wherein said pump comprises a hydrodynamic pump.

9. The battery cell of claim 8 wherein said pump comprises a rotatable impeller to move said electrolyte.

10. The battery cell of claim 1 wherein said pump comprises a hydrostatic pump.

11. The battery cell of claim 10 wherein said pump comprises a diaphragm pump wherein a flexible diaphragm is moved to create a flow of electrolyte.

12. The battery cell of claim 1 wherein said pump comprises:

an electric motor mounted outside of said housing;

a shaft extending from said motor through said cell cover into said housing, said shaft being rotatable by said motor; and

an impeller positioned within an enclosure, said impeller being attached to said shaft and rotatable thereby for moving the electrolyte in and out of said first and second ports.

13. The battery cell of claim 8 wherein said pump further comprises one of the following types of impellers: a drill bit, a screw, or a coiled spring.

14. The battery cell of claim 1 further comprising an electric motor configured to drive said pump.

15. The battery cell of claim 14 further comprising an enclosure within which said motor is sealed from battery gasses.

16. A battery cell having means to mix acid within the battery cell; said battery cell comprising:

a battery cell housing having an upper and lower section;

positive and negative plates positioned within said housing;

liquid electrolyte within said housing and in contact with said positive and negative plates;

a cell cover covering a top of said housing;

a pump capable of pumping said electrolyte and having a first port through which said electrolyte flows into said pump, and a second port from which said electrolyte is discharged from said pump, said first port being positioned in said electrolyte in said lower section of said housing, said second port being positioned in said upper section of said housing.

17. The battery cell of claim 16 wherein said first port is positioned in a lower one fourth of a height of said electrolyte.

18. The battery cell of claim 16 wherein said first port is positioned in a lower one fifth of a height of said electrolyte.

19. The battery cell of claim 16 wherein said battery cell has a head space in said upper section of the housing which contains gas, said second port being positioned within said head space.

20. The battery cell of claim 17 wherein said pump comprises a diaphragm for moving said electrolyte.

21. The battery cell of claim 17 wherein said pump comprises an impeller for moving said electrolyte.

22. A method of mixing electrolyte in a battery cell, said method comprising the step of using a pump to draw electrolyte from a first level of said battery through said pump to a second level of said battery where the specific weight of said electrolyte is different from that at said first level.

23. A device for mixing electrolyte in a wet cell battery, said device comprising:

a pump mountable to said cell for pumping electrolyte;

a first port in fluid communication with said pump through which electrolyte can flow between said pump and said housing, said first port being configured to be positioned in a lower section of the battery cell when the device is installed in the battery cell;

a second port in fluid communication with said pump through which electrolyte can flow between said pump and said housing, said first port being configured to be positioned in an upper section of the battery cell when the device is installed in the battery cell; and

an electric motor for driving said pump.

24. A device in accordance with claim 23 wherein said pump comprises a piezo-electric liquid pump.

25. A device in accordance with claim 23 wherein said pump comprises a diaphragm pump.

26. A device in accordance with claim 23 wherein said pump comprises an impeller.

27. A battery cell having means to mix acid within the battery cell; said battery cell comprising:

a battery cell housing having an upper and lower section;

positive and negative plates positioned within said housing;

liquid electrolyte within said housing and in contact with said positive and negative plates, said electrolyte having a surface level;

a cell cover covering a top of said housing;

a head space within said housing between said surface level and said cell cover, said head space containing gas; and

a pump capable of pumping a fluid, said pump having a first port through

which said fluid flows into said pump and a second port from which said fluid is discharged from said pump, one of said first and second ports being positioned in said electrolyte in said lower section of said housing, the other of said first and second ports being positioned in said upper section of said housing.

28. A battery cell in accordance with claim 27 wherein said fluid to be pumped is said electrolyte.

29. A battery cell in accordance with claim 27 wherein said fluid to be pumped is said gas from said head space, said first port being positioned in said head space to draw gas therefrom, said second port being positioned in said lower section of said housing to discharge said gas thereto.

30. A battery cell in accordance with claim 29 wherein said pump comprises a diaphragm pump.

31. A battery cell in accordance with claim 27 wherein said fluid to be pumped is said electrolyte, said first port being positioned in said lower section of said housing to draw electrolyte therefrom, said second port being positioned in said upper section of said housing to discharge said drawn electrolyte thereto.

32. A method of mixing electrolyte in a battery cell, said method comprising the step of using a pump to draw in fluid from a first level within said battery and discharging it to a second level of said battery, wherein one of said first and second levels is in a lower section of the cell, and the other of said first and second levels is within the cell above a liquid surface level of the electrolyte.

33. A method in accordance with claim 32 wherein said fluid is gas, and wherein said method comprises pumping said gas from said above said liquid surface level to said lower section.

34. A method of mixing electrolyte in a battery cell, said method comprising the step of using a pump to draw in gas and discharging it into the electrolyte in a lower section of the cell, there being one said pump for each said cell.

35. A method on accordance with claim 34 wherein said gas is drawn in from outside said battery cell.

36. A method on accordance with claim 34 wherein said gas is drawn in from a head space within said battery cell above the electrolyte.

37. The battery cell of claim 1 wherein said first port is positioned at an electrolyte level near a bottom of said plates.

38. The method of claim 20 further comprising the step of turning on said pump when charging said battery cell.

FIG. 1

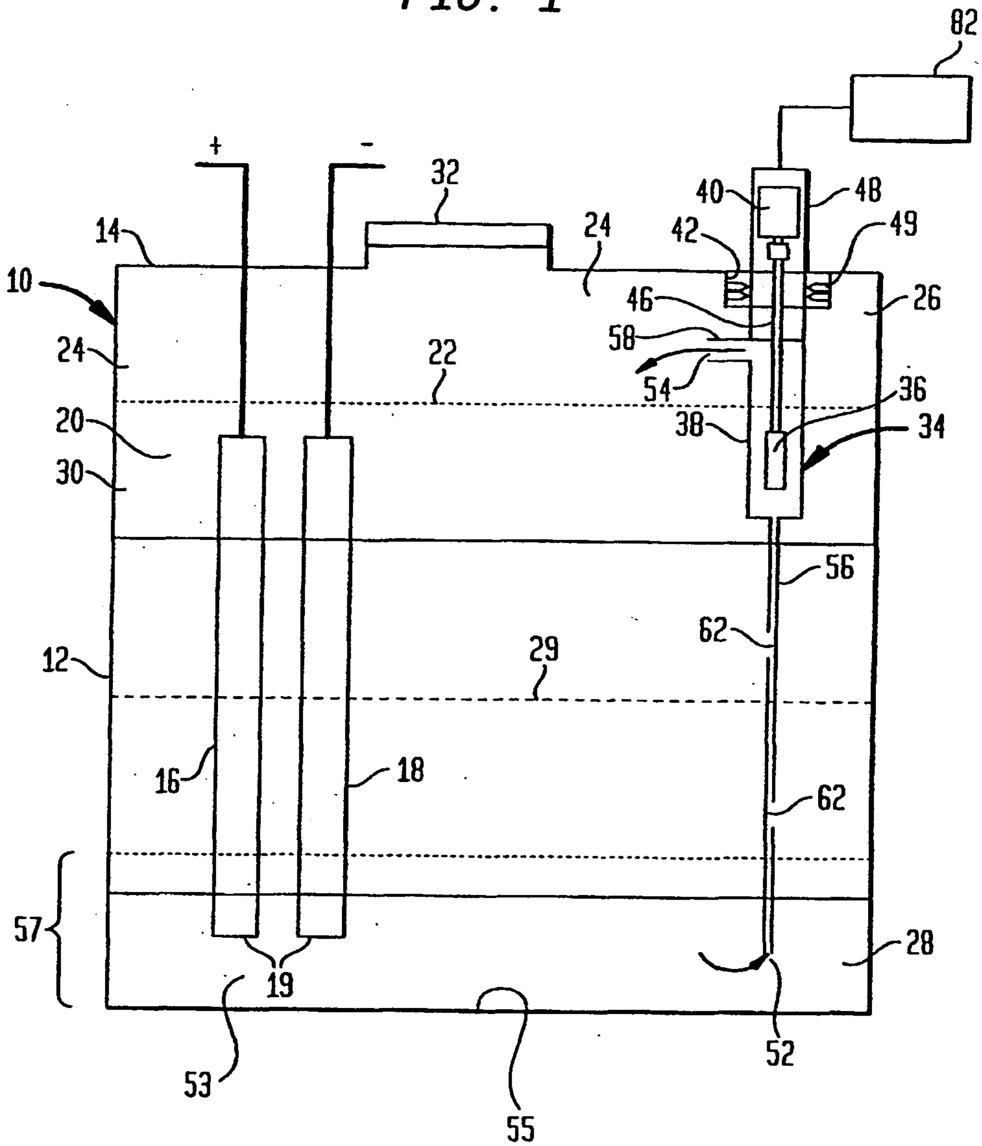

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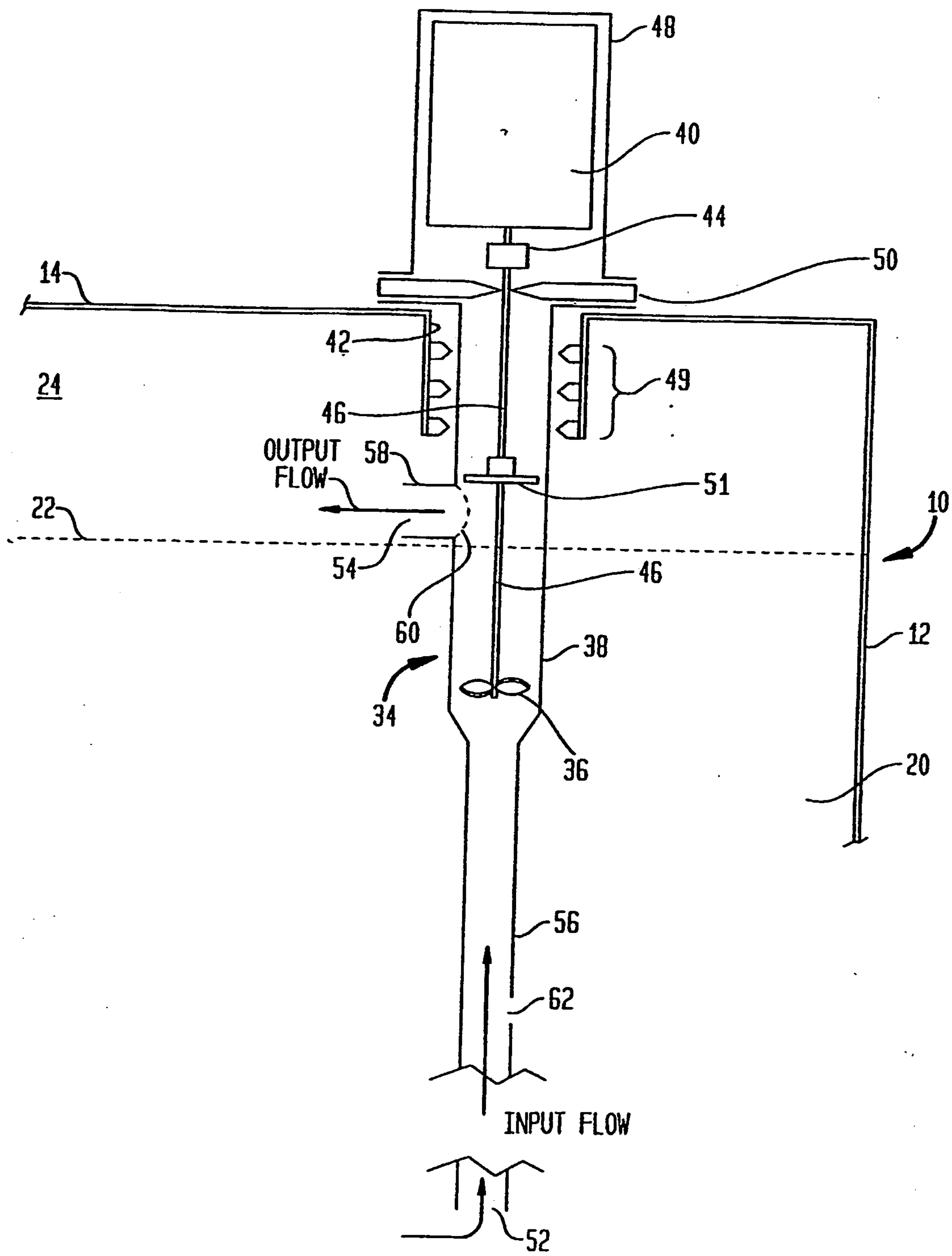
FIG. 1A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INPUT FLOW
52

FIG. 2

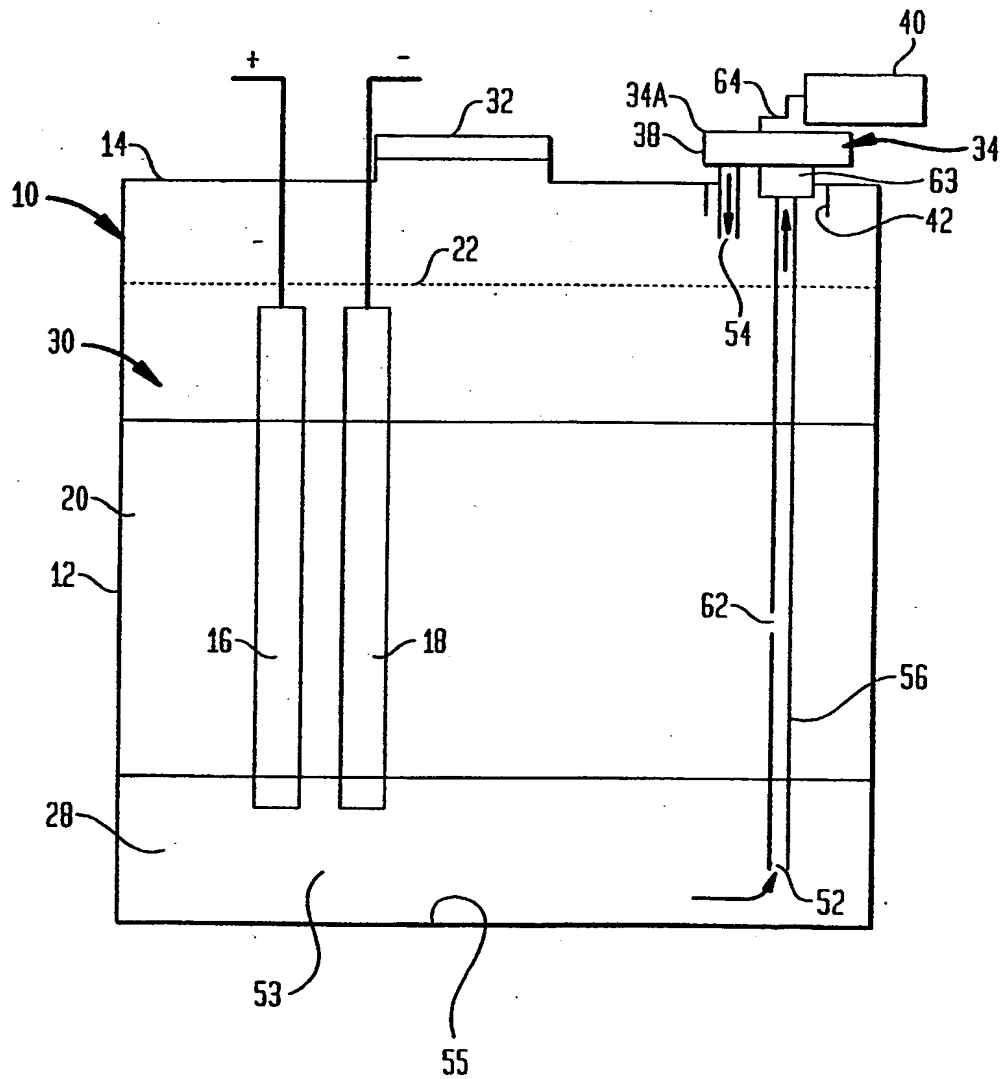
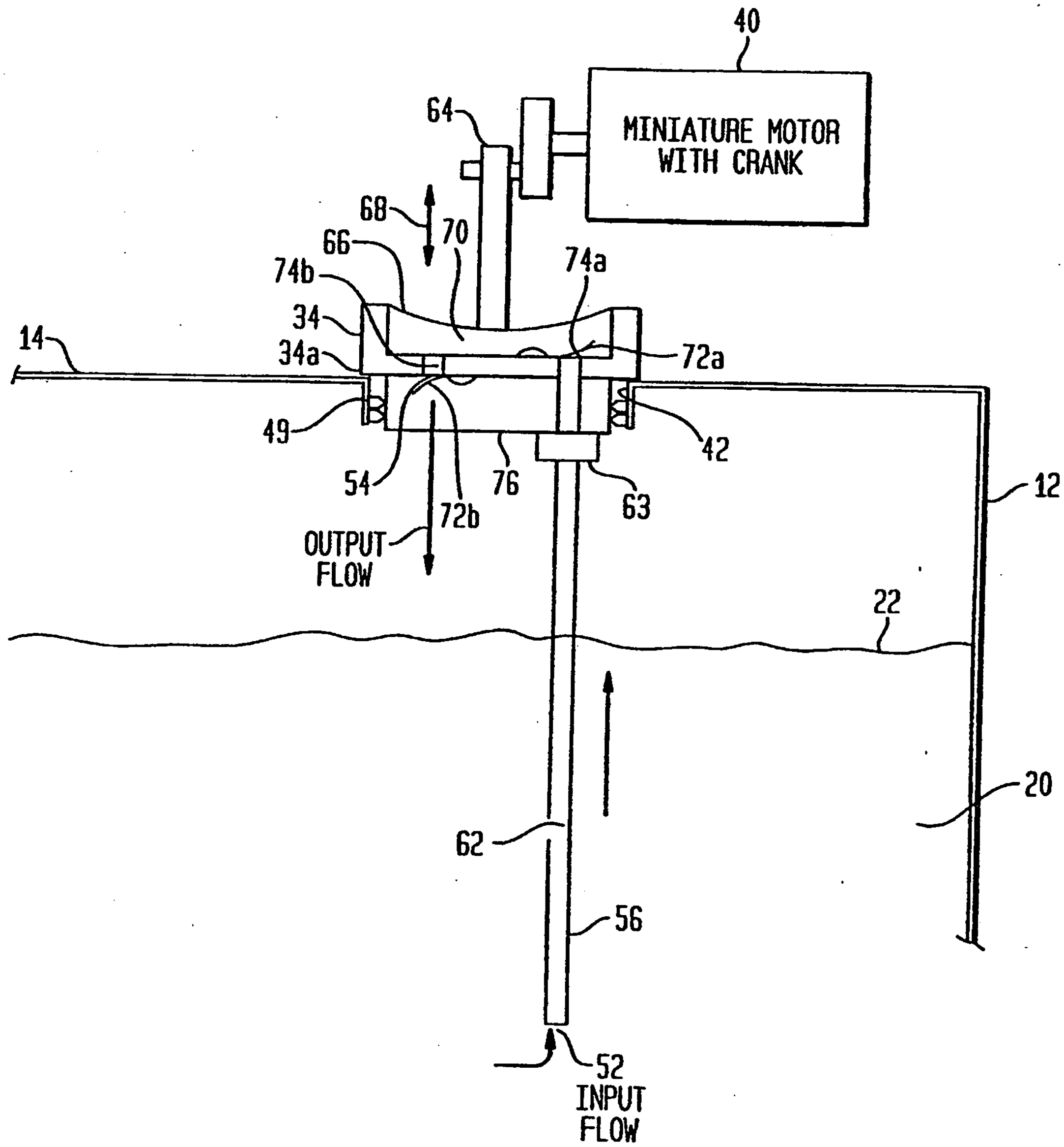


FIG. 2A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INPUT FLOW

FIG. 3

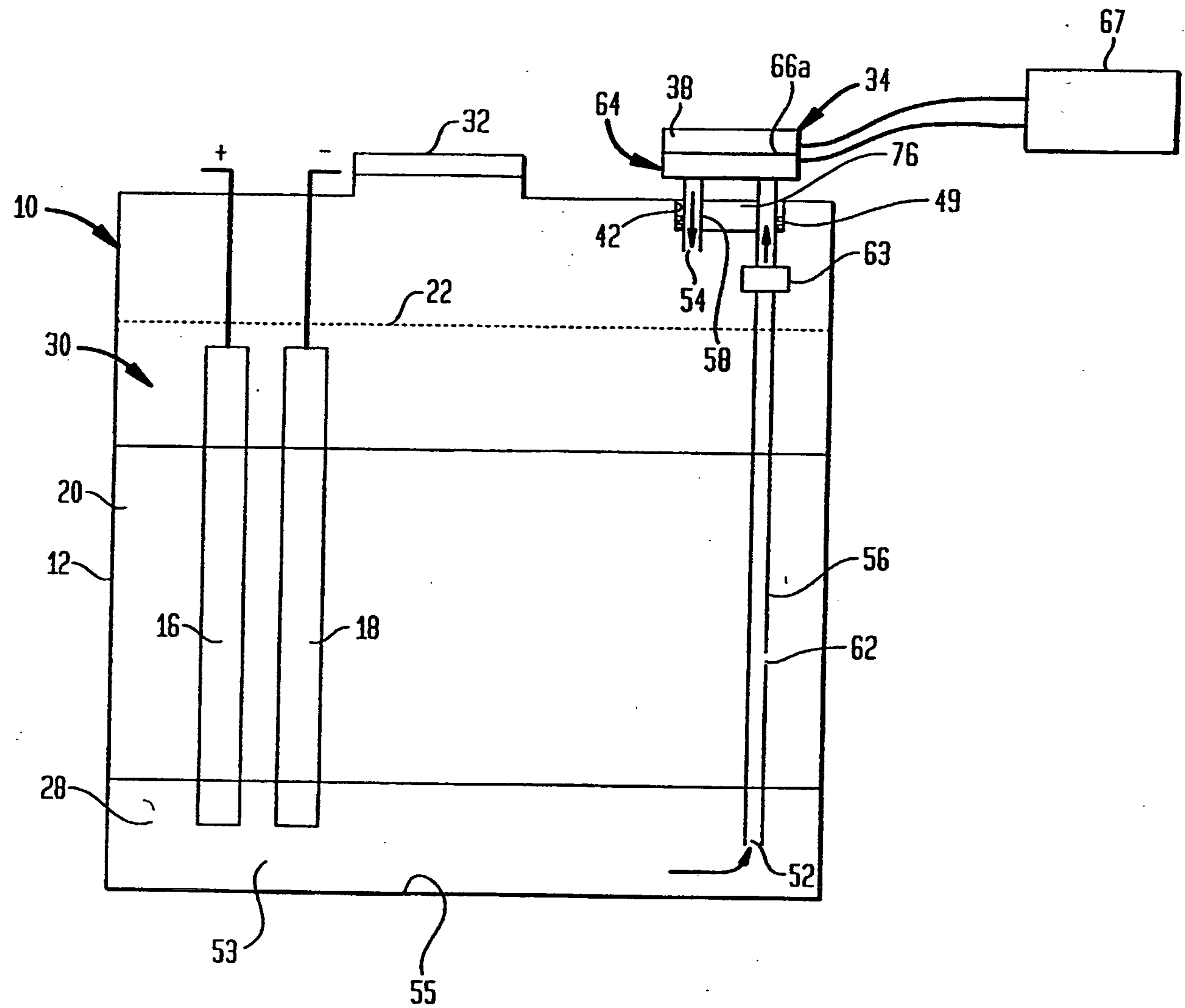
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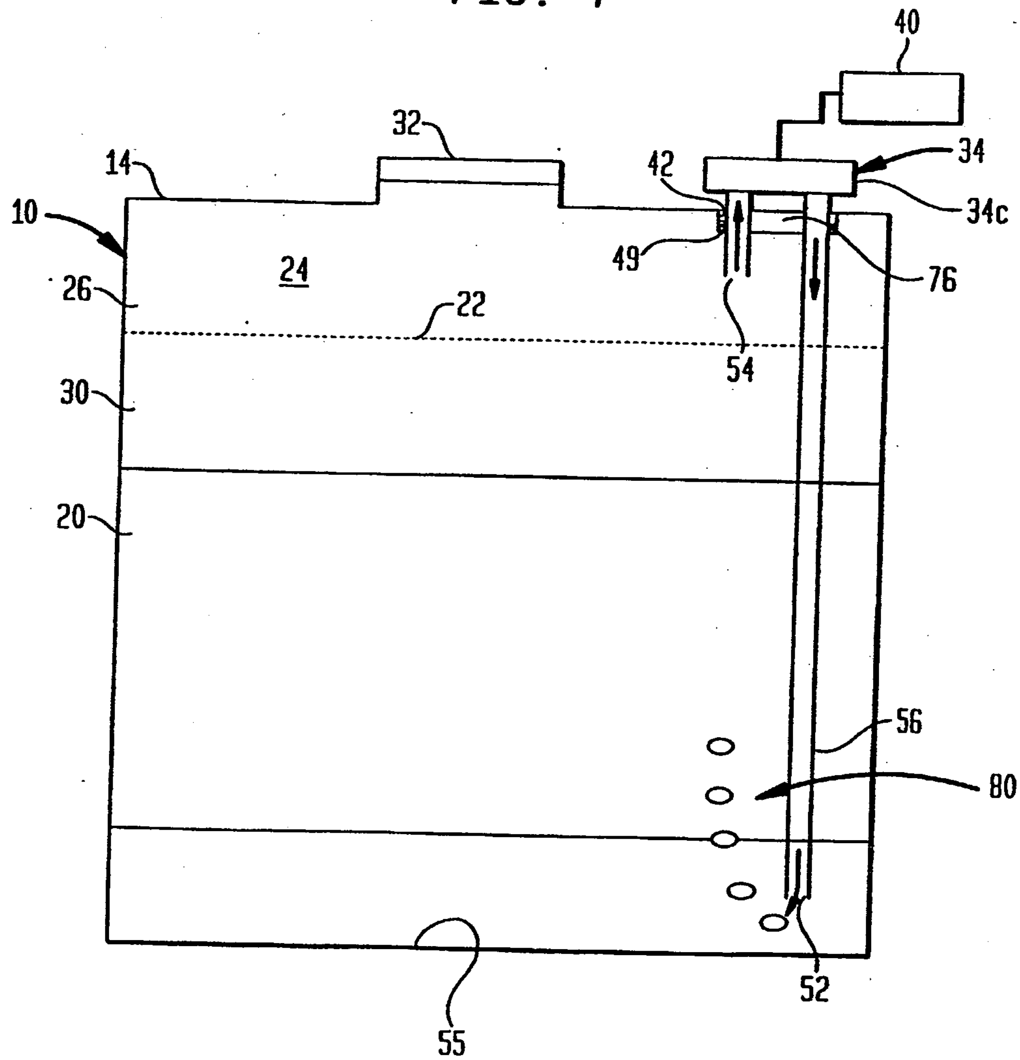
FIG. 4



INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.
PCT/US03/11726

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER
IPC(7) : H01M 02/38, 02/12
US CL : 429/80, 81, 82, 84
According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC

B. FIELDS SEARCHED

Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols)
U.S. : 429/80, 81, 82, 84

Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched
Non-Patent Literature

Electronic data base consulted during the international search (name of data base and, where practicable, search terms used)

C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category *	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
X	US 4,308,322 A (HAMMAR) 29 December 1981 (29.12.1981), column 2, line 53 - column 3, line 51, Figures 1-3.	1-3, 5, 16-18, 22, 27, 28, 31-34, 36, 37
X	US 5,665,484 A (BOLGER) 09 September 1997 (09.09.1997), column 5, line 21 - column 6, line 38; column 6, lines 40 - 55; Figures 1 & 2.	1, 3-5, 11, 16-18, 20, 22, 23, 25, 27, 28, 30, 32
A	US 4,603,093 A (EDWARDS et al) 29 July 1986 (29.07.1986), The Whole Document.	1-38
A	US 4,221,847 A (INKMANN) 09 September 1980 (09.09.1980), The Whole Document.	1-38
A	US 5,173,374 A (TIEDEMANN et al) 22 December 1992 (29.12.1992), The Whole Document	1-38

☐ Further documents are listed in the continuation of Box C. ☐ See patent family annex.

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"O" document referring to an oral disclosure, use, exhibition or other means

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"T" later document published after the international filing date or priority date and not in conflict with the application but cited to understand the principle or theory underlying the invention

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"Y" document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is combined with one or more other such documents, such combination being obvious to a person skilled in the art

"&" document member of the same patent family

Date of the actual completion of the international search
08 August 2003 (08.08.2003)

Date of mailing of the international search report
22 AUG 2003

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